




THE RANCH ON THE BEAVER

By ANDY ADAMS

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By Andy Adams

IN this story, Andy Adams — himself a real cowman — describes the later adventures of 'Wells Brothers, the Young Cattle Kings.'



The dangers that beset the ranch, the pluck and ingenuity with which those dangers were met, the thrilling episodes of ranch life, the rodeo, the mustang hunt, the fight with the prairie fire, the right way to deal with cattle-rustlers, the life on the trail, the way cattle are bought, cared for, fattened, herded, taken to market, sold and shipped, — these and a hundred other interesting things form the background of this story of the further growth of the Wells Brothers partnership.

THE RANCH ON THE BEAVER



By ANDY ADAMS

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CAUGHT HIM BY THE HORNS THE FIRST THROW (*page 57*)

THE RANCH ON THE BEAVER

A Sequel to
'Wells Brothers: The Young Cattle Kings'

BY
ANDY ADAMS

With Illustrations by
EDWARD BOREIN



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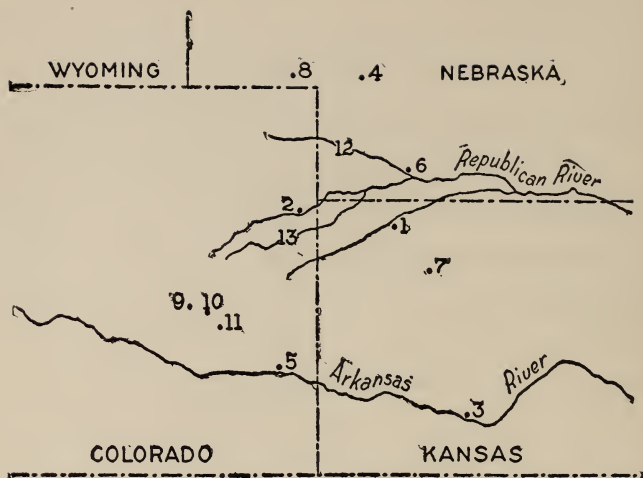
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Drawn by Edward Borein



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THE RANCH ON THE BEAVER



CHAPTER I

THE RANCH ON THE BEAVER

AMONG the sand-dunes in Northwest Kansas several rivulets unite and form Beaver Creek. The Creek threads its way through dips in the plain, meanders down meadow and valley, and is finally lost in confluence with the Republican River. The farthest western settlement on the Beaver was the ranch of Wells Brothers. •

The only landmark in the country was the Texas and Montana cattle trail. This trace passed some six miles to the eastward of the original homestead of John Wells, a Union soldier, who had preëmpted it some years before. Exiled on account of health, after a short residence on the Beaver his death followed, leaving two healthy, rugged sons, Joel and Dell Wells.

At the beginning of this chronicle, in the fall of 1887, Joel, the elder of the boys, had reached the age of eighteen, while Dell was some two years younger. The most marked feature of the latter was a shock of red hair; he was slender in figure, talkative and boastful, and without a thought or care for the

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future. The older lad was the reverse of his brother; quiet, cautious, spare in his words, sure in his every move and action, which marked him apart from a youth of his years. The concerns of life, a sickly father, a thoughtless brother, the struggle for mere existence on a homestead, without neighbors, had aged the boy almost into manhood. Otherwise, auburn-haired, with a frank countenance, the elder one showed all the family marks of his younger brother.

An incident changed the lives of the boys. Two summers before, when on the point of abandoning the little homestead, a man, Quince Forrest by name, from the cattle trail, reached their home, accidentally wounded from a pistol shot. The sod shack of the settler was transformed into a hospital, and the lads lent every aid in caring for the wounded man. Forrest, himself a Texan, had a wide acquaintance amongst the drovers, had been a trail boss himself, and knew the ins and outs of the cattle trace. Confined to the homestead for some two months, he levied on the passing herds, summoned every foreman to his cot in a tent, and established a friendship between the trail men and his benefactors.

The pleadings of the wounded man readily secured for the boys the nucleus of a herd. The long march from Texas had rendered many of the cattle footsore; there were strays in every herd, all of which contributed to stock the new ranch. Every trail foreman, under the pretext of founding a hospital,

left his strays and cripples on the Beaver. At the end of that year's drive of cattle into the Northwest, the brothers had secured a snug little herd of fully five hundred head.

The boys, in their new occupation, took root from a vigorous winter that followed. With the coming of spring, anxiously they looked forward to the arrival of the Texas herds, en route north. The latter were delayed by drouth, but finally came like an army with banners. Among one of the early herds to arrive was a young man stricken with malaria, who found a haven at the little ranch on the Beaver.

Jack Sargent proved himself a worthy successor to Quince Forrest. A drouthy year, the trail drovers dropped on the Beaver range an unusual flotsam of stricken and stray cattle. After his recovery, Sargent remained with the brothers, acting as their foreman. Born to the occupation of cattle, a Texan, his services soon became invaluable. There was no detail of a ranch in which he was not a capable man.

The drouthy summer doubled the holdings of the brothers and they made new acquaintances, among whom was the drover, Don Lovell, employer of Forrest. The old cowman proved his friendship that fall by inviting Joel Wells to come to Dodge City, a trail market to the south, where the boy bought a small herd of cattle on credit. The terms called for a factor in the sale of the cattle when matured into beef, with a trusty man, an employee of the seller,

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who remained with the cattle until they were consigned to a commission firm, the agent in the sale, at an established market.

This mutual agreement added another man to the ranch, Joe Manly, from the Pease River, in Texas, where the cattle were bred. Manly was a languid, lazy Texan, true to his employer, and never seen to good advantage except on horseback. This, however, was peculiar to the Texans, a pastoral people, who were masters in the occupation of ranching. Thus manned and mounted, the brothers met the second winter, which proved to be a mild one.

The occupation of the boys, maturing beef, was in a class by itself. Texas bred the cattle, but the climate interfered with their maturity into marketable range beeves. It required the rigors of a Northern winter to mature a Texas steer into the pink of condition for the butcher's block. Two winters in the North were better than one. Hence the cattle trail into the upper country, where maturity brought its certain reward. If above three years of age, a single winter might mature them; if younger, two winters; 'double-wintered' was the rule. Nature provided a day of maturity, usually the fall after reaching four years old, when the range finished every hoof prime for market. Therefore two-year-olds were preferred in stocking Northern ranges, where the severity of the climate rounded them into beeves.

Restocking their ranch became a question with

the brothers. Kansas, in fear of fever, had quarantined against Texas cattle. A new trail, through Colorado, afforded the needful outlet to the North. The boys had contracted, on the same terms, from Manly's employer, a Mr. Stoddard, at Ogalalla, Nebraska, for a second herd, which was then under herd on the Republican River and within a few days' drive of the Beaver. After the shipping season was over, their financial standing enabled the brothers to buy still another herd, at Trail City, in Colorado, on the new trail. This contingent was held in voluntary quarantine by the new owners, in fear of fever among their own wintered herd, until after the first frost, when restrictions were lifted and both herds trailed in to the home range on the Beaver. All told, the ranch faced its third winter with a holding of nearly eight thousand cattle.

It was no easy task. The original range, claimed three summers before, had been extended down the Beaver fully five miles below the old trail crossing. The water controlled the herd; range north or south of the creek was a matter of no concern, the cattle ranging out as far as five miles in the summer and not to exceed ten in the winter.

The pride of the ranch was its equipment of horses. The *remuda* — a word adopted from the Spanish, meaning the relay mounts — now numbered over a hundred head. The buying of through horses, unacclimated ones, a year in advance of their needs, had proved its wisdom during the beef-shipping

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season just passed. During that brief period, tense as an army on the march, the rule was frequently four changes of mounts daily. A half-mounted man was useless, and a strong remuda was a first requisite on a beef ranch.

'This ranch has horse-sense,' said the solicitor for the commission house, on his second visit. 'That's a big point in your favor. You're mounted until the day, the month, and the end of the year. In ranching, horses are to the cattle industry what marine insurance is to ships putting out to sea. Your horses are your only guarantee.'

The rapid expansion of the Wells Ranch kept a number of horses constantly under saddle. During the idle months, even when working a small outfit, a daily change of mounts was necessary. Only in winter work were a few horses corn-fed, while the remainder, subsisting the year around on grass, were used only during the rush of summer months, and by men who knew the limits of endurance of a range horse. 'Never tire a grass horse' was a slogan of the range.

In meeting the requirements of the coming winter, two new line-camps were established, one on the lower end of the range, and the other, an emergency camp, south on the Prairie Dog. They were rough shelters for man and horse, and were known as the 'Dog House' and 'Trail Camp.' An extra amount of forage had been provided at headquarters, the other camps liberally supplied, and before winter

set in, a car of corn would be divided among the various camps.

Necessarily, the new shelters were located during the haying season. Joel and Manly selected the sites, placing Trail Camp on the Beaver, six miles below the old Texas and Montana trail crossing, it being simply a matter of shelter and convenience to meadows. Dug-outs were the order for men and horses, and a creek bluff, facing the sun by day, with running water, met every requirement. In locating the camp on the Prairie Dog, a careful study of the topography of the country governed the site. The latter outpost was intended only as a relay or emergency shelter, in case of a winter drift, and was not meant for regular occupancy. It might be called on to bunk half a dozen men and the stabling to shelter double that number of horses.

The site was important. 'Allowing the bulk of the cattle to range above headquarters,' said Manly, summing up the situation, 'your emergency camp must occupy a strategic point. The lay of the land will govern any possible drift crossing to the Prairie Dog. Whether a storm strikes out of the North or Northwest, the cattle will take advantage of any shelter, and the first arroyo they reach will carry them down to the main creek. My idea is to locate your camp at the mouth of the first arroyo east of the sand-hills.'

Joel and Manly had halted on the crest of the southern divide, between the Beaver and the Prairie

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Dog. 'The only arroyo that puts into the Prairie Dog,' said Joel, indicating the direction, 'holds almost a due south course. For the last few miles it's just a big dry wash. Old buffalo trails run down it to the main creek. The mouth of the wash is almost due south from headquarters. I led a drift down it two winters ago. Struck the wash about midnight.'

The site was miles distant and Manly had never seen the ground. 'The mouth of that dry wash,' said he, as if he had camped there, 'is the ideal point for your dug-out. It's a wonder some buffalo hunter didn't make his headquarters there.'

'There are thousands of old buffalo skulls along the Prairie Dog and around the mouth of that wash. Dell and I used them for seats around our camp-fire.'

'I thought so. The buffalo faces the blizzard, drifting before it strikes. Cattle, caught out in a storm, drift with the wind until it breaks. Nature intended the buffalo to face the storm, and clothed his fore parts accordingly, but gave the cattle the instinct to drift.'

'Another advantage,' suggested Joel, 'in case a storm strikes in the evening and we cross the divide at night, the arroyo will pilot us into camp. We can find it the darkest night that ever blew. Let's locate the dug-out and stable to-day, and either one of us can bring the haying outfit over later.'

The brothers were fortunate in able assistants. In knowing the inner nature of cattle, their deeps and moods, the Texan stood in a class by himself.

In reading the topography of the surrounding country, Manly was able to tell that cattle adrift would concentrate at a given point. The sand-dunes on the right would turn a cattle drift from the Upper Beaver, and, as did the buffalo, the drifting herd would instinctively cross at the same landmark. It was not in wearing a sombrero or leather chaps or gaudy neckerchief that one qualified as a cowman, but in that sure knowledge of every act, mood, and whim of the cattle of the range.

Joel's earnestness kept his outfit at concert pitch. 'One of our sponsors was a soldier,' said he, 'and always used military terms in fortifying to meet a winter. This work of building dug-outs, getting in supplies, pickling beef, and the like, he would call bringing up the ammunition and looking after the lines of entrenchment. He believed in strong reserves, in seeing that the firing line lacked for nothing, and then he expected a man to hang and wrestle like a dog to a root. He claimed the only safe way to hold cattle in the winter was to do your sleeping in the summer.'

The new men were selected with care. All four were Texans, two of whom had weathered winters in the North, young, rugged fellows, horsemen of steel, tireless, undaunted, immune to hunger, fair or foul weather, so long as horse or mount of horses could respond to the call of duty.

The new men were coached daily. 'One extreme follows another,' said Joel, 'and last winter let us off

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easy. We may never see another as severe as our first, but I'm counting on some sure-enough winter this coming one. If it happens to be only dry and cold, there's nothing to fear, but sleet and wind are to be dreaded.'

'Wind especially,' emphasized Sargent, the foreman, nodding to the new men. 'It not only asks about your summer's wages, but it searches your very soul for the sins of your ancestors. It ranges from a balmy zephyr up to a blue-cold wind that will shake a horse off his feet. If your hat blows off on the Beaver, wire your friends in dear old Texas to pick it up. These plains are surely some windy in winter.'

CHAPTER II

THE UNEXPECTED

THE winter outfit numbered eight all told. In addition to those already mentioned were two brothers, Bob and Verne Downs, who were stationed at headquarters. They were utility men, either one of whom could cook, wrangle horses, take out a wagon, or make a hand in the saddle. They had proved themselves on the trip up from Trail City and at the isolation camp in the sand-hills, where the last herd was held in voluntary quarantine. Dale Quinlin had come in with the same cattle, while Reel Hamlet had been dropped early in the fall with the Stoddard herd. All four were valuable additions to the line-riders of the previous winter.

Joel and Bob Downs would ride from headquarters, though the other two knew the lines equally well. Substitutes might be called for, as Manly had reports to send out or mail was expected, while some one must visit the ranches on the Republican River to the north. For mutual advantage cowmen were forming local associations, and with the increased number of cattle on the Beaver, the brothers were awake to the importance of protecting their every interest. By thus joining with some valid organization, which published an annual pass-book, giving a list of its members, the location of their ranges,

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and brands in detail, the members would be mutually protected. No animal could drift so far but a comparison of pass-books, represented in a national association, would reveal its owner.

One evening, near the close of November, Dell and Sargent rode into headquarters from the north. The latter, when crossing the divide, reined in his horse and voiced the belief that he had scented smoke. On reaching the ranch, a general inquiry among those afield that afternoon failed to confirm the report.

'It was a vagrant breeze,' admitted the foreman. 'Still there is no mistaking the smell of burning grass. Hunting parties in the sand-dunes may have been careless with fire. Or some fool might have set the prairie afire just to see it burn.'

Joel tensed rigid at the report. 'North on the Republican they burn fire-guards to protect the range,' mused the boy. 'If the Beaver Valley was to burn ——'

'There's a world of dry grass to the west, frost-killed into tinder,' continued Sargent. 'Let's ride out on the divide after dark.'

Nightfall confirmed the danger. Under a low horizon the harbinger was marked on a wide front, a mere glow in places, but clearly distinct on the flanks. The distance was unknown, but the night air was tainted with the fumes of burning prairie.

'Joe,' inquired the foreman, on returning, 'how are you on fighting a prairie fire? Wear any medals?'

'I'm the best what am,' answered Manly. 'Lead me to it.'

'You're there now. This outfit moves at daybreak to fight fire.'

'You mean back-fire?'

'Of course; back-fire against the big blaze.'

A general consultation followed. There was permanent water in the Beaver, several miles above The Wagon, an outpost established the winter before, where a camp could be located. The remuda must be taken along, a commissary outfitted, as if it were the beef-shipping season. An old plough was unearthed, the mowing machine was called into service, with water barrels in each wagon.

'Lucky thing that our corn is all freighted in,' said Joel. 'How many sacks shall we take along?'

'Only enough for two teams, say three days' supply,' answered Sargent. 'By that time the fire will beat us, or we will beat it. Nothing but back-firing or a heavy rain can stop the flames.'

'And here's where you young fellows can cut out sleeping altogether,' said Manly. 'When you fight fire, you don't sleep any until it's all over. Hardly worth while taking blankets along.'

A restless night passed. Fortunately the teams were in hand, and an hour before daybreak two wagons moved up the valley under emergency orders.

Dell took the lead. 'Follow the old wood road to Hackberry Grove,' urged the foreman. 'Touch at

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The Wagon and lighten ship of the corn. We'll bring the guns and everything else that's overlooked. Shake out your mules; unless this range is saved, you have no other use for teams. Roll those wagon wheels.'

Dawn came begrudgingly. Heavy smoke-clouds, hanging low, filled the Beaver Valley, somber as a shroud. The remuda was even difficult to locate in the uncertain light of early morning.

It was an odd cavalcade that moved out from headquarters. Two carried axes and a third a scythe, while rolls of gunny-sacks were tied to every saddle cantle. The entire remuda, over a hundred strong, was taken along. Not a man was left behind.

'We're off!' sang out Sargent, swinging into the saddle. 'We don't know where we're going, but we're on our way. You lads with the axes shake out your horses and skirmish some wood at the Grove for camping. Don't spare your horses, because the remuda will be right at your heels. Jingle your spurs.'

Nothing but the fear of fire would have justified the pace. The axemen were lost to sight before the saddle horses could be swung into action. Three horsemen whirled their ropes at the rear and along the flanks of the flying squadron. Calves sprang from their beds in the tall grass and fled, followed by frantic mothers. The older cattle, sedate in manner, beheld the apparition with wonder, stood firm

or turned tail, distance governing, while the bulls bellowed their defiance. Surely a strange disturbance in a peaceful valley!

The wagons were overtaken at the Grove. Joel and the foreman pushed on to select a camp above. The Wagon, a former camp, was passed without a glance. Pools were known to exist up the creek, though one month was no guarantee for another, and water, in quantity, was essential to the work in hand.

A known pool — a long pond — afforded the required water. The site was only a mile above the old line-camp. The two scouts dismounted from badly spent mounts and slackened cinches.

‘I want Manly’s idea of the plans,’ said Sargent. ‘If we can burn a lane to the sand-dunes, and north to the divide between here and the Republican, it ought to check the course of the fire. So much depends on the wind fanning the oncoming flames. It might jump a mile in a strong wind and be unable to cross a ploughed furrow in a calm or in damp grass. With any breeze, a prairie fire runs wild during afternoon and evening hours.’

Joel admitted that to him fighting fire was an unknown task. ‘We used to notice fires in the spring, north and south, but never in the west in the fall. Jack, I want you to take full charge.’

‘Burning the range in the spring is a good idea. It gives the cattle fresh grass. I wish Manly would make haste.’

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'If I catch your idea,' bluntly said the boy, 'back-firing means to burn against a fire beyond control.'

'That's it. Meet it, burn into it, against the wind. Widen the breach, if possible, miles wide, but hold your back-fire safely under control. For that reason we must burn by night, widen the burnt lane, keeping your own fire in hand. If Manly agrees, we'll start our back-fire from this pond. We don't need this range this winter, and it will give us early grass.'

Manly rode up in advance of the others. The foreman's plans were adopted. 'You and Joel take the plough and work south into the sand-hills, and I'll take the mower and work out toward the divide. Cut the ground into sections, from a quarter to a half-mile in length, and leave the last mile unburnt. Never let your fire get away from you on the flanks. Give us two or three days and we'll know where we stand.'

Camp was made. The men were divided into two squads. The mules were refreshed and things set in readiness. Both crews would work out from the same camp, at least for the first day and night. The one who best knew the work led the way, the others eagerly attentive.

The foreman took charge to the north, assisted by the Downs brothers, while Dell brought up the rear with horses under saddle. Old hand hay rakes cleared outward, to be burnt later, the swath of the mower's sweep. At first, at every few hundred yards a notch was cut to the depth of a few rods, on the

side where later the torch would be applied. By firing the indent first, the flames would feed in various directions, presenting an uneven front.

The work was slow and tedious. On the one hand lay the home range, on the other a menace of desolation, admitting of no hasty or uncertain step. Where the grass grew rankly as many as three swaths were cut down in forming the base of the fire-line.

‘I’m cropping the grass to its roots,’ said Sargent to his helpers. ‘Rake the ground to the last straw, and we can whip out any loose fire in the stubble. Dell, tramp down those heavy fronts of sedge and blue-stem with your saddle horses. Tramp it down for a full rod, so the fire will feed slowly. Slight nothing, lads, if we expect to take the wagons home.’

By early evening, the foreman had laid a dead-line of fully five miles, while the plough had gathered a double furrow of nearly the same distance to the south. Mounting their horses, both crews hastened back to camp, where hunger was satisfied for the moment and fresh mounts secured.

‘What’s the word?’ inquired Manly, as every possible straw of the situation was carefully thrashed over.

‘We ought to get a lull in the wind between sunset and dark,’ suggested Sargent. ‘The sun will set in a few minutes. This breeze is a trifle strong for narrow base-lines. Fill the canteens and soak the gunny-sacks. Everything that is worth while, and will

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burn, should be in the wagons. Joel, suppose you hang around camp for half an hour, and, in case the fire jumps the dead-line on us, run these wagons over on the burnt ground. You can snake them out of danger from the pummel of your saddle. Now, that's about all, except to apply the torch.'

Every man awaited the word with impatience. The older men walked through the heavy grass; it crushed brittle in their hands and fairly crunched underfoot.

'There ought to be moisture in the air within an hour,' suggested Manly.

'Not unless the wind falls,' answered the foreman. 'This is some dry country. Feel the heat in this dry grass.'

'She's lulling,' announced Dell. 'Can't you feel it?'

Still the word was withheld. Sargent walked up the dead-line alone, but hurriedly returned.

'Fire the margins of the pond first and apply the torch north and south,' said he quietly. 'Try and make it back to the wagons by daybreak. Keep your horses safely in hand.'

Matches flashed at the word and tiny flames sprang up. The men had wrapped torches of long grass, could make others as needed, and the back-fire opened promisingly.

A lazy breeze lingered. 'Just enough air to make it feed greedily,' observed the foreman, who had remained with Joel at the camp. 'We ought to burn

a fire-guard a mile wide to-night. Your side is burning like the flame of a lamp; mine is lapping it up in eddies.'

He mounted his horse. 'These boys of mine are liable to overrun the trail, like young hounds. I must overtake them. Your men have old heads.'

Within an hour the back-fire was a mile wide. By midnight it had covered a front of over five times that distance, a slight semicircle, eating in slowly.

Late in the night, Sargent called his boys together. 'We've burnt our limit,' he announced. 'We have barely a mile yet of dead-line cleared. It will take several hours to get the team back on the job. Let's double-team and burn a second and third counter-line, a quarter of a mile apart, entirely back to the creek. Fire it just wide enough so that it will consume itself before morning or before the sun rises to-morrow. Wrap up a gunny-sack full of torches so we won't have to dismount. Notice the fire to the west; ten or twenty miles nearer than last night. It's spreading north of the Republican; see the low horizon line.'

Dell and Verne Downs took the inside circle, swinging low from their saddles and applying the torch about every fifty yards. The outer line was fired almost entirely by Bob Downs, who rode leisurely to the rear of the inner line, frequently dismounting to apply a match and renew his torch. The foreman covered both lines, as the firing must be finished fully an hour before daybreak.

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When the task of the night was nearly finished, Sargent located Bob Downs. 'I'm on my way back to our own flank,' said he. 'The unexpected might happen; the wind might whip around to a new quarter and catch us asleep. Now, have our team on the ground at sunup and fresh horses for every man. We've got a good fight started, and excuses are out of order. If you can think about it, you might bring me a can of tomatoes and a cold biscuit.'

Manly's crew also burned back-circles to the creek. Opposite camp, where the torch was first applied, the fire had eaten its way only a few hundred yards, fighting against random breezes. Under any favorable air pressure, the interstices between the circles would burn out within a few hours.

Dawn found every man in the saddle. On arriving on the northern flank, two strangers were present. 'These lads are from the Republican,' explained Sargent. 'They saw our light and have come over to lend a hand. They report a fire-guard, burnt a mile wide, north of the river. That was the glow that we saw last night.'

Turning to the men the foreman continued: 'Follow this fire-guard down to the wagons. Skirmish something to eat and a change of horses. One of you report to Joel Wells, over south, and the other return here. You didn't aim to sleep any, did you?'

'They've quit sleeping over on the Republican,' admitted one of the tired men, lifting himself heavily

into the saddle. 'This fire-guard will take us to camp, you say?'

'That comes near being neighbors,' observed Sargent, once the lads were out of hearing. 'The ranches on the Republican are in the same boat with us. It's a common fight and calls for all hands.'

Extending the fire-guards on the Beaver was merely a repetition of the day before. The commissary, the base, must be brought up to the front. Near the middle of the afternoon, Dell and Verne Downs were dispatched with the team to bring up a wagon, a barrel of water, and a fresh relay of horses.

They returned before dark, to find everything in readiness to apply the torch on a new five-mile front to the north. The south, the ploughed, line had made similar progress, with its commissary also in hand.

By midnight the Beaver back-fire was fully eighteen miles in length, while a similar one on the lower side of the Republican snailed out to meet its neighbor on the south. Another night and they would surely meet.

'I don't like the looks of that wild fire on our west,' admitted the foreman, when his boys gathered at midnight at the extreme limit on their flank. 'You don't notice it now, but early this evening, while the grass was dry, she threw up a red tongue that was far from friendly. It may be forty miles away and it may be only thirty. In the afternoon, when the wind lends a hand, she steps out some.'

'It's reported that the fire started near the Colorado line,' said a boy from the Republican. 'It seems that it got away from campers.'

'More than likely,' agreed Sargent. 'Now, you boys burn your circles a trifle wider to-night. The ones you laid last night burnt out in four hours. I'm going back to the Beaver and lay a new line of back-fire to meet your outside circle. That's you, Bob, and the boy from up-country. Bear in mind, lads, this byplay is to save the cows on the home range. I'll pick you up before daybreak.'

The foreman rode hard, hugging the fire-line, broken and jagged like saw-teeth. On reaching the creek, he rode up its bed, through the fire, and was soon dropping matches to throw a signal to his own men.

On meeting the latter, Dell and his partner were detailed, after firing their line to the creek, to bring up half of the remuda.

'Another day will finish it,' said the foreman, 'when we can send everything back to safety. We're working now without rhyme or reason, without day or date, and at the mercy of the elements. We must keep things in hand. We may have to run ourselves. This isn't a fire in the kitchen stove.'

It was daybreak when the saddle horses reached Sargent's wagon. 'You fellows come through on time — like an ox train,' admitted the foreman, who had leisurely returned to his post. 'You must have split the remuda on a guess.'

'The other boys had hobbled the bell mare,' said Dell defensively, 'and we made a running cut in the dark. On time, are we? These twenty-four-hour shifts cover a lot of ground. I could fall out of this saddle and never wake up.'

'It's the making of you, son. You're a coming cowman. I'll put you on the mower this morning, and that will shake you up. A mowing machine is the very trick to keep a sleepy boy awake.'

An early start was fortunate. By ten o'clock a stiff breeze was blowing out of the north. An hour later it was veering to the west. At this instant it was discovered that the men from the Republican were burning out the approaching fire-guard a mile wide, the fire following the ploughs.

'That calls for the torch,' announced the foreman. 'Wet your gunny-sacks and burn slow but sure. Those men must know something.'

They did. A courier arrived with the information that two ranges, north of the Republican, were burnt the day before. That the flames jumped a fire-guard a mile wide; that if the wind veered farther to the west, under any pressure of air, the flames were due to sweep down the divide that afternoon.

'Throw caution to the winds,' pleaded the messenger. 'Burn now; apply the torch. Fight fire with fire.'

'Is that the word?' inquired Sargent.

'It's the only chance.'

'How soon will your ploughs meet our mower?'

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‘By noon, easily.’

‘Verne, round up the remuda and tramp down any tall grass. Neighbor, catch a fresh horse and lend the boy a hand. Flatten out those strips of blue-stem grass.’

It was tense work. Some sixty saddle horses were sent in a gallop over the dangerous spots, doubling back and forth where necessary. The foreman brought up the rear, whipping out numerous fires, any one of which would have laid waste the home range.

The indents, cut into the lee side of the fire-guard, proved valuable, allowing the flames to run in three directions. By early noon the fire-line across the divide was finished. The burning crews met; the face of every man and boy was soot-stained; every canteen was drained.

‘Our wagon will be here directly,’ announced the Beaver foreman. ‘We had half a barrel of water left this morning. This is a dangerous point on the line. Let’s burn some back-circles and widen this fire-guard at least a mile.’

Dell arrived with the wagon. ‘A band of fully forty antelope crossed the fire-guard back about a mile,’ he announced. ‘If I hadn’t been in such a hurry, I might have shot one.’

‘Those antelope, moving, indicate danger,’ announced Tony Reil, an old ranchman from the Republican. ‘Better make things secure.’

‘Just my idea,’ agreed Sargent. ‘Unload this

water barrel. Knock the lid of a crate of tomatoes and give every one present a can. Dell, take a saddle horse with you and cache the wagon alongside the pool at our first camp on the Beaver. Pick up all the loose stock and tie in with Joel and Manly. Report that this end of the line will win or lose this afternoon. I'll keep the carbine and the axe.'

He turned instantly. 'Bob, you and Verne drift up a passel of cattle, with bulls among them.'

'That's the talk,' sanctioned Reil, the cowman.

'Son,' continued the Beaver foreman, addressing the first volunteer helper, 'will you please take charge of our remuda. You'll find a lagoon on the left, about two miles down the divide. Water the saddle horses and hold them within signaling distance. Anything else?'

The question was addressed to Tony Reil. 'Empty that crate of tomatoes into this water barrel. We must be here until late, and we may be here in the morning. Now, let's you and I thread this back-fire and ride out a distance, just to see what we can see.'

'Fellows, burn back-circles,' urged Sargent, as they rode away.

In the short buffalo grass the back-fire was easily threaded. A curtain of smoke hung like a pall over the divide. Whirlwinds threw up, high above the horizon, spirals of smoke. Balls of fire shot upward. A thousand antelope were in sight at a time, suddenly moving down the watershed.

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The two men only ventured out a few miles. The wind was fair in the west. The old cowman looked at his watch. 'Coming up thirty minutes late to-day,' he commented. 'It jumped the fire-guard on Hillerman's range yesterday just at two o'clock. By sundown it took fighting to save the hay and stabling. An hour earlier, neither one would have been saved.'

A shower of ashes fell. 'There's a hint,' observed the foreman. 'Let's drop a few matches on our way back. It's only a question of time now.'

The detail of cattle were in sight. Sargent met them and shot an old bull. 'Kill a couple more,' said he, handing the carbine to Bob Downs, 'and stampede the others to safety. I'll split this one and have a pair of drags ready, if the fire jumps. This is our last card.'

It was a harsh but sane precaution. Within an hour a steady rain of ashes was descending. Tongues of fire were visible above the black line, rolling forward, and dipping to an end in clouds of smoke. The air was fairly filled with charred débris. A palm held forth was quickly covered with ashes; every one whipped it from his hat; clothing took fire. An oppressive feeling gripped every heart. The horses trembled.

The foreman distributed his men along the danger-line, only a dozen all told. It seemed hopeless. Small fires broke out across the fire-guard, when watchful horsemen dismounted and whipped them

out with wet gunny-sacks. One assumed dangerous proportions, in the midst of which Manly and his men arrived and the blaze was smothered. From the lower end of the line the danger was apparent on the divide, and every one had hurried to the scene.

And not a moment too soon. Apparently, as the wind-swept fire met the counter-blaze, great tufts of grass, blazing like rockets in midair, were lifted and carried over a mile, far over the fire-guard, and igniting a front fully a thousand yards wide. Fortunately it happened between sunset and dark, the wind lulling with the evening hour.

The remuda was signaled up. Orders rang out. 'Bob, take fresh horses and split those cattle that you killed. Take half the outfit and make a fight from the lower flank. Let the back-fire run. Jump onto this front blaze.'

Detailing Joel and Dell to his assistance, Sargent rode to the first animal killed. Ropes were noosed around the pastern joint, fore and hind foot, and from the pommels of saddles the split carcasses were fairly floated astride the burning front. Ropes were lengthened to about thirty feet, allowing the horses to straddle the fire, the drag, flesh-side down, smothering, crushing the blaze. Horsemen followed closely, dismounted, and whipped out re-kindling flames.

With the falling of darkness the fire was making a headway of fifty feet a minute. But once the

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flanks were turned, leaving the rear to exhaust itself, a shout went up, answered down the slope, now a hand-to-hand fight.

'Take my rope,' said the foreman to Dell. 'I'm going around to see how Bob's making it. Keep your rope out of the blaze and veer your horse away from the fire in gusts of wind. Be careful and don't singe him. Swing well out from the blaze. Who's handling the other half of this beef?'

'Joel and Mr. Tony from the Republican.'

'Good men at a fire. Shift horses often on those drag-ropes. I'll be back directly.'

Down the slope the fire was equally well in hand. 'Girls, you've got her whipped,' announced Sargent. 'These drags are just about what the doctor ordered. Look back west. The big show's over. Nothing more to burn unless we give our consent. She'll die out in the sand-dunes.'

Before midnight the fire that had jumped the guard was crushed out. A few thousand acres of the Beaver range were lost. Westward, as far as the eye could see, a prairie fire, with a hundred-mile front, was smouldering to a quiet death. The back-fire had accomplished its ends.

'If you boys will go down to our wagons,' said the Beaver foreman to the men from the Republican, as they sat their horses surveying the field, 'we'll put on the big pot, kill a chicken, and churn. There's water there, and we'll wash our smutty faces and pull off a big sleep.'

'There's water in the river,' said Tony Reil, reining away. 'Drop over sometime.'

'What next?' inquired Joel.

'Take the remuda back to camp. If the boys are sleepy, stand them up against the wagons and let them have a little nap. I want to hang around here an hour or so to make sure the fight is won. I'll be in early in the morning.'

CHAPTER III

THE BIG DRIFT

THE foreman was late in reaching the wagons. There was no longer any danger to the westward; where the fire had jumped the guard at dawn every margin was critically examined. Fire was found smouldering here and there, some of which might have re-kindled to a blaze. Every trace, even of smoke, was whipped out on the home side of the fire-guard.

The camp was a desolate sight. The wagons were cached on the burnt ground, and the men had unsaddled over the line, in rank grass. They lay about, as if they had fallen in an Indian massacre. A number of men from the Republican River, compelled to return for their mounts, were among them. Sargent seemed immune, an iron man, fully familiar with the sleep of exhaustion, and merely rode by to satisfy himself, dismounted and kindled a fire.

It was noon before many of the men awoke. 'Let me have four hours' sleep,' said the foreman to Joel, the first one to awake, 'and this afternoon we'll ride south into the sand-hills. I want to see the end of the back-fire. If it looks safe, we'll camp to-night at The Wagon and go home in the morning. Better send a wagon out and gather any plunder that we abandoned north of here. Let them take a keg of water along and drown out any smouldering fires.

Call me promptly. I'll be asleep in that heavy grass across the creek.'

December passed without a move on the part of the cattle. Several light snows fell, storms threatened, each passing away with an angry horizon, but leaving the herd contented. Joel met Manly each morning, and Sargent during the evening ride, when every phase of the weather was discussed.

'What do you think of the weather?' became a standing inquiry on the part of Joel, when meeting either one on the line.

'I'm not even the son of a prophet,' was Manly's evasive answer. 'Try it yourself, and you'll find out that you're earth-born; that you lack the gift of prophecy.'

'You never ask my opinion on a cow or horse,' replied the foreman, when pressed with the regular question, 'and don't try and flatter me into turning weather prophet. Possibly the mantle of the prophet Joel has fallen on your shoulders; he was a range man. You try it this winter. It always makes me out a liar.'

The boy knew his limitations and avoided all nonsense. 'Manly will have to go to the railroad with his monthly report, and the very first chance I want to go to the Republican. We both can't leave at once. I wish we knew ——'

'Turn weather prophet,' insisted Sargent. 'Forecast a bad storm, and if it doesn't come, we'll hail

you as a good prophet. We'll ride the lines just the same, anyhow.'

Early in the year, Manly went to the railroad with his December report. It was flattering in the extreme; typical of the pastoral contentment which reigned on the Beaver. Two days were allowed for the round trip, which, under normal conditions, was ample time. On this particular trip, Manly started at dawn, and as the day wore on an uneasiness was felt, not only by the courier afield, but by those remaining behind. Every hour carried the harbinger of a change of weather; and even when the riders parted on the lines at evening, it was still an open question what the day might bring forth.

This time the expected happened. The day ended as balmy as a spring morning. The cattle were ranging out on the watershed to the north and to the burnt country above the upper line camp. When the patrols returned to their respective quarters, only a few scattering bunches of cattle were in sight, all of which was well north of the Beaver.

With the falling of darkness, a change in the weather could be sensed. Within an hour after night-fall, a wind swept out of the north, raw to the freezing point, and every man in the outfit, absent or present, was aware of the task that confronted them. The different camps were alert to the necessity of the hour. Quinlin was serving as a substitute at Trail Camp, and before ten o'clock that night, Dell and Sargent rode into headquarters, bringing their relay horses and blankets.

'What do you think?' hailed Joel, busy outfitting a wagon, as the others dismounted.

'I think we'll play in big luck if we head the drift on the Prairie Dog,' answered Sargent. 'The storm struck early, and out on these flats the cattle must drift until they strike shelter. If they cross this valley, it's good-bye, Irene, I'll meet you on the Prairie Dog — possibly, perhaps. Unlash this bedding; my fingers are all thumbs from this cold.'

Sleep was out of the question. Dell and Verne Downs were to bring the wagon in the morning. 'Pilot the commissary in to the emergency camp,' said Joel to his brother, 'and then ride for the Upper Prairie Dog. If the cattle are adrift, the rest of us will ride to their lead; if they're moving broadside, we'll turn in the flanks. If they're bunched, we'll turn them at the new Dog House, at the mouth of the dry ravine. Once you sight cattle, it will give you a line on the situation. And be sure and start your wagon an hour before daybreak.'

The start was made at midnight, with every extra horse under rope. Sargent took the lead, and with the wind at their backs the trio defied the elements, Bob Downs bringing up the rear.

'Do you suppose those fellows at the lower camp will know enough to start to-night?' insisted Joel, mounting his horse. 'Manly's gone, you know.'

'If they're cowmen, they will,' answered the foreman. 'The cattle won't wait until morning.'

A sifting frost filled the air. Under an ordinary

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saddle gait, the horsemen would cross to the emergency camp in four hours. But as they neared the divide, the storm struck without mercy, the led horses crowded those under saddle, and the only relief was to shake mounts into a long gallop. On reaching the southern slope, a lull in the storm was noticeable, the dry wash was entered as if it were day, and an hour before schedule time the horses were under shelter and the men had kindled a fire in their own Dog House.

‘The wind has held from the same quarter,’ announced Sargent, ‘which is in our favor. We’ll turn any possible drift before noon.’

A breakfast was prepared from the emergency stores. Coffee is a staple in every cow-camp, and once the men were warmed up, fresh horses were saddled to await the dawn. Conjecture was riot as to whether the cattle were drifting or not, when Hamlet and Quinlin rode up and hailed the dug-out. They were benumbed in their saddles, having quartered the storm, but once the comfort of the shack and its bounty was theirs, the situation became known.

‘Cattleadrift?’ repeated Hamlet. ‘Why, Dale and I have run amuck drifting cattle every hour. We left our dug-out at ten o’clock. You fellows must have left before sundown.’

‘We’ve been here a little over an hour,’ said Joel, watch in hand. ‘You’re sure that the cattle are drifting?’

'The creek bed's full of them,' answered Quinlin. 'We struck it several miles below and had to grope our way up here.'

'Come on,' urged Sargent; 'dawn will be here within half an hour. Once you fellows get warm, ride your own end of the line. Bob and Joel will go west, and I'll ride south a few miles, in case any cattle have crossed the Prairie Dog.'

Daybreak found Sargent miles out on the flats, leading to the next divide south, without an animal in sight. An hour later the sun flashed forth, for a brief moment, but the sifting frost blinded the lone horseman. Satisfied that human vision was of little use in the present glare of icy sheen, he turned westward in the hope of picking up any possible trails. Meanwhile Joel had cut the spoor of drifting cattle, and while running it out, was overtaken by the foreman.

'We'll head this drift within an hour,' consolingly said Sargent, on overtaking Joel. 'Every hoof ought to be found over the next divide. There's nothing adrift now but new, through cattle.'

On reaching the divide, a surprise awaited the pair. Within a mile, over the crest, a lone horseman had turned the drift of fully five hundred cattle. Shaking out their horses, the two rode to his assistance, conjecture running wild as to who it might be at such an early hour in the morning.

Sargent's reasoning faculties, rather than his vision, solved the mystery. 'It can't be any one but

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old man Manly,' said he, shouting into Joel's ear. 'That old boy couldn't sleep in a warm bed, knowing that these cattle might be adrift. I can almost make out his horse. Yes, it's old Joe!'

He was found, benumbed, speechless, bordering on a stupor, and unable, without assistance, to dismount. He was fairly dragged from his horse, rubbed with snow, raced around in a circle, the twinkle in his eye the only symptom of life. On recovering, it was learned that he had left the station, timing himself so as to reach the Prairie Dog at daybreak. He had come up the trail, riding into the eye of the storm, and only quartering it after turning westward. He reported the one in hand as the only drift, and was sent direct to the emergency camp.

Before noon, the lead of the drift was returned to the Prairie Dog. The wagon had arrived early, and with all hands in the saddle, the flanks were turned in, the country scouted far and wide, and by evening every hoof was bedded under the bluff banks of the creek. The cattle had reached the Prairie Dog, covering about the same front as their winter range on the Beaver, and were left scattered for the night.

Three days of raw weather followed. The wind continued from the north, lulling with a falling temperature at night, and of a necessity the line was held on the Prairie Dog instead of on the home range.

'What's the difference?' said Sargent, pleading for delay before starting the drift homeward. 'The

corn tastes just as sweet to the horses here as at home. We have our own Dog House, and even if we do sleep a little cold, it'll make us get up earlier. When it warms up, the cattle will want to go home. As long as we know where the teepee is, and have the cattle in hand, I'd as lief be lost as found.'

The Dog House was a comfortable shelter. 'I know it's not good manners,' said Manly to Joel, 'to complain of your chuck, but the architect who planned this emergency camp entirely overlooked the comforts of a guest-room. Here I must sit on a sack of corn or on buffalo skulls. At my sunny home on the Pease River, we wouldn't treat a Mexican horse wrangler this way. And I'm your only guest.'

'Verne,' said Sargent austere, 'to-morrow rack up more of those buffalo seats. Build a little platform of skulls at the corner of the fireplace, for the guest of honor. Build it high enough so that Colonel Joe can issue orders from a throne of skulls. Let no one, for a moment, lose sight of the fact that Joe's our guest, from the far, sunny South.'

A second storm, accompanied by sleet, followed, not severe enough to drift the cattle, but compelling the outfit to remain a week afield. The weather faired off the third day, when the wintered cattle, led by cows, began the homeward drift. Coming voluntarily on the part of the herd, it was looked upon as a good omen.

'There's the advantage of a few cows,' said the

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foreman to Dell, when the homeward drift was noticed. 'As long as there is a cow present, a steer is always quiet and contented or willing to be led by the horn. A cow will go back to the same spot, year after year, to give birth to her calf, while a steer is a roving rascal. A bell mare has just the same influence over saddle horses. A mare and colt will hold a remuda of horses better than a wrangler. But the moment one gets out of hearing of the bell, he's a gone gosling and will nicker like a lost child.'

All signs fail in bad weather. One week after the first storm struck, and only a few hours later at night, the harbinger of a blizzard turned the homeward drift to the shelter of the Prairie Dog. The change was sensed within the dug-out, the entire outfit turning out and noting every phase of the situation.

'Farewell, Beaver, farewell, Prairie Dog,' lamented Sargent. 'We love you, but we must leave you!'

'This is more than we bargained for,' said Joel; 'and we have no emergency camp to-morrow morning.'

'We can make the railroad our next base of checking the drift,' suggested Manly. 'Better load the wagon now and start a few hours before day-break. The cattle are adrift this minute.'

It required stout hearts the next morning to take out a wagon and defy the elements. That the major portion of the herd was adrift there was no question,

neither was there a moment's hesitancy to saddle and try and ride to the lead. Four o'clock in the morning was the hour agreed upon, and, leaving Bob Downs and Quinlin to hold the line on the Prairie Dog, men and horses humped their backs and took the storm. It was possibly not so cold as the first one, but the velocity of the wind was more severe, enough to whip the cattle into a trot across the flats and exposed places. Given a seven hours' start, there was little hope of overtaking the drag end of the herd under thirty miles. The cattle were off of their home range, away from known shelters, and those instincts of life which taught them to flee from an enemy also warned them to drift with a blizzard.

An outline on the herd, after the first storm, revealed about half the cattle on the Prairie Dog. The latter line was covered by Quinlin and Downs at dawn, the trial of the morning being to turn a second drift from the Beaver. Among the latter were hundreds of brands, unknown to the detailed men, but, given the advantage of light, the drift was checked, two thirds of the cattle coming down the dry arroyo, and turning in to shelter above and below the dug-out. While patrolling the line, the detail was joined by two horsemen from the north, who reported themselves as belonging to an outfit from the Republican River, then encamped at Wells Brothers' ranch on the Beaver. The men from the Republican predicted that the present would be

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remembered, for years to come, as 'the big drift of January, '88.'

Meanwhile, the main outfit had held together until dawn. Again leaving Dell to pilot the wagon and saddle stock, a quartet of horsemen gave free rein to their best mounts and rode on with the storm. Trails of drifting cattle were seen, stragglers were passed, the railroad reached, with no knowledge of the extent of the drift. Without a halt a wide circle was made to the south, hundreds of cattle were caught, moving with that sullen stride which knew no relief until the storm abated.

'What do you think?' inquired Joel of Manly, on meeting at noon.

'We may have the lead in hand, and again we may not,' replied the latter. 'One thing sure, we have reached our limit away from the wagon. We must make it back to camp before dark. And it's going to be slow work, drifting cattle against this wind.'

Dell joined them in the middle of the afternoon. He reported having camped the wagon about a mile north of the railroad. A dry creek bed had been found which would afford shelter for the cattle, fuel had been gathered, as the night must be weathered in the open.

The back trail required patience. The herd had split into contingents, and to pick up and turn them homeward was no light task. The main herd turned a dozen times, but the men dismounted and fought them until the cattle yielded, facing the storm in

preference to the mastery of man. Toward evening, the sun burst forth for an hour, and with the scattered bunches under herd, now numbering over a thousand head, five horsemen lined them out for camp. It was dark before the hungry herd bedded down, Dell and Sargent taking the first watch on guard.

‘How do you like it out West?’ inquired Sargent of his bunkie, as they met on the beat. ‘Do you think we’ll ever see The Wagon again?’

‘You ought to have been with us two winters ago,’ chattered Dell, his voice quivering. ‘There was a winter with whiskers on it. Talk about cold!’

The herd was bedded in the bend of a dry creek, and one man awake until midnight was sufficient patrol. Fortunately there was but little snow, tarpaulins were spread about the fire, tired men snuggled into their blankets, and the night blotted itself out.

It was fully thirty miles to the emergency camp, and a start was made with the dawn. The necessity of grazing the cattle was urgent, and scarcely one third of the distance was covered by noon. The wagon had taken the lead, dinner was waiting, and without a halt mounts were changed and the snail’s pace of the cattle was maintained. The wagon was excused, and after a final change of horses for the day, Dell followed with the saddle stock.

When darkness fell, some five miles to the south, the cattle were freed for the night. The weather had

faired off, and on reaching camp the men from the Republican were still present. Reports were compared, and from the figures at hand, random as they were, it was openly admitted that the brothers had lost cattle during the present drift.

‘Well, suppose we have lost some,’ said Manly, ‘there’s still a grain of comfort; we did all we could. And they say that angels can do no more. It simply means that we must cover the spring round-ups.’

‘In the winter of eighty-five and six, cattle drifted from the Niobrara down on to the Republican,’ remarked one of the men from the latter river.

‘You’ll have to go south to the Arkansaw River,’ suggested Manly to Joel. ‘Throw out your drag-net and throw it wide.’

Another day was lost on the Prairie Dog. The recovered cattle were brought in, the flanks turned closer, and toward evening the entire holdings, covering a ten-mile front, were started north. Camp was abandoned the following morning, the weather having moderated, many of the cattle not being overtaken before noon. Once the general drift was safely within the original, outer lines on the Beaver, the cattle were abandoned, and every one touched at headquarters before continuing on to their respective camps.

The outfit from the Republican had made a stand on the Beaver. Without molesting the home cattle, they had picked up nearly a thousand of their own,

holding them under herd and penning at night in the old winter corral. A willing hand was lent them the next morning, and such cattle as had crossed to the Prairie Dog were gathered, the outfit starting home without the loss of an hour. Three storms had struck within a week, and no one could tell what a day might bring forth.

Joel was impatient to get a line on their own cattle. He and Bob Downs made several range counts, with the cattle scattered for twenty miles along the Beaver. Making due allowance for several hundred unclaimed strays among their own, the lowest possible count showed a thousand cattle short.

'That would be about my guess,' languidly agreed Manly, when informed of the count. 'For the present, we're short about that many.'

Joel drew a grain of comfort from Manly's unconcern. 'What are you going to say to Mr. Stoddard?'

'I'll write him that storms struck us in one-two-three order, and that we surprised ourselves by the good fight we put up. We weren't caught asleep; no storm slipped up on the blind side of this ranch. I'll tell my old man that you boys are planning to be represented at every round-up next spring where there is any possibility of a single Lazy H or —— Y being astray. I'd better suggest to Uncle Dudley letting me stay here until after the round-ups are over. What do you think?'

'I wish you would,' urged Joel. 'We'll need you

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then more than ever. You see, we never had occasion to go on the round-up. And don't let Mr. Stoddard get uneasy. You feel sure, don't you, that we'll bring the missing cattle back?'

'Bring them back!' repeated Manly deridingly. 'Well, we're just about the boys who can bring home the bacon.'

CHAPTER IV

THE SPRING ROUND-UP

THE winter of 1887-88 is marked in range history by its vast cattle drifts. No section, north or south, was exempt from the rigors of the storm king. Even in the Texas Panhandle, drifting cattle lodged against the fenced lines of railways to such an extent that ranch outfits were rushed by rail to relieve the congested points. The cattle were held against the wire fences by the merciless winds, and nothing but prompt action, requiring hundreds of men and horses, saved the day.

The ranch on the Beaver was sorely tried. A second drift occurred the following month, and a third one during the latter part of March, both being turned on the Prairie Dog. Fortunately the drifts reached the latter creek during the hours of light, and were held by a patrol in patient waiting. Every man in the Beaver outfit was called to the saddle, and nothing but sleepless vigilance prevented a further drift from the home range. Thousands of strays came down from the north, and were held the same as if owned on the Beaver. Possibly some neighbor to the south, in observing the golden rule, was doing likewise. On the range it was possible to cast bread upon the waters.

Joel made several trips to the Republican.

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Membership was secured in a cattle association to the north, and another in the south, both being State organizations. The Nebraska cattle men would be represented in all round-ups in Kansas, and it was a matter of economy with Wells Brothers to hold membership in each association.

'We're going to outfit two wagons,' announced Joel to the line riders in council. 'All our neighbors on the Republican will send men and horses, will share in the commissary expense, and in the wages of cooks and wranglers. I agreed to furnish a wagon and team, and we'll have about thirty men and over two hundred saddle horses. If any of our cattle get through that drag-net, it's because our eyesight's poor or we can't read brands. What do you think, Don Jose?'

'You seem to have the lesson before school takes up,' answered Manly.

Spring came early, the lines were abandoned, and the men at the outposts returned to headquarters. The herd had wintered strong, only a slight winter-kill among the old cows, and the ranch rested in contentment. The round-up for western Kansas was not yet announced, the first of June being about as early as the cattle would shed their winter coats, the brands be readable, the grass be capable of sustaining mounts, and admit of beginning the work. A month or more of idleness confronted the ranch, and Sargent, urged by Dell, revived the subject of hunting the wild horses at the outer lakes, over the

line in Colorado. The presence of a band of mustangs became known, the fall before, while holding a new herd in quarantine.

'I'm laying for you fellows with a green elm club,' announced Joel, addressing his brother. 'The lines of entrenchment were broken last winter, and our reserves of horses are not going to be wasted in hunting mustangs. With over a thousand cattle adrift, not a saddle will be cinched, not an ounce of horseflesh will be spent on any side issue. Gathering our cattle astray is the next big play coming up, and it calls for all hands and the cook. There's a fine old man down on the Pease River who comes first. His interests don't call for any wild-horse hunting this spring. Now, take your medicine like nice little boys, or haul wood for next winter, anything to take the wire edge off you.'

'After those few remarks,' said Sargent, bowing, 'hunting the mustang, for the present, is a closed incident. Dell, I'm sorry we left The Wagon. It seems that our ability is not appreciated at headquarters. Picking wild flowers is all that is left us now.'

'Some medicine talk,' observed Manly, as Joel walked away. 'And to the point. Save your horses is good advice. If we have wet weather during the spring round-up, that will take the starch out of you two.'

Early in May, notices of the round-ups began reaching headquarters. Work was to begin the 25th

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of the current month, in the association covering western Kansas, and in which the brothers held an active membership. Their mail multiplied; no less than half a dozen pass-books reached them, from members of similar organizations to the northwest, even from Montana. Letters poured in from cattle men in Wyoming and Nebraska, conferring power of attorney on Wells Brothers, to gather any cattle adrift, in the brands given and within the territory of their home association.

'Do you understand this?' inquired Joel, handing a power of attorney to Sargent.

'Simple as sifting meal,' answered the latter. 'This cowman is unable to send men to the round-up in western Kansas. Instead, he authorizes you to gather his cattle, if any are found astray in the territory of your organization. You'll have to furnish each of your men with a list of brands, not only of your own, but also those for which you hold authority to gather. Carry this document with you on the round-up, and when you claim a stray, do it on the written authority of its owner. This is just a detail, a side issue, in rounding out your education as a cowman.'

'There are so many brands and a half-dozen powers of attorney,' said Joel, hesitating.

'Start a little book for each of your men,' explained the foreman. 'Give a list of your own brands on the first page. On the next one give the names of the cowman or company from whom you hold writ-

ten authority, and a list of his or its brands. As fast as power of attorney is given you, add another page to your book.'

'We have authority to gather over forty brands already.'

'That's nothing. Any man worth sending out on a round-up ought to keep a hundred brands in his mind. They're as easily remembered as saddle horses.'

'But why should so many come to us?' queried the boy.

'Exactly. Yours is the extreme northwest range in your association; it's marked so on the map. Those powers of attorney come to you on account of your location. If you gather cattle, report to their owner. He may send for the strays, or he may authorize you to ship them on his account. It's an easy word to spell.'

Joel hesitated. 'It means a lot of work, and ——'

'Read the rules of the different cattle associations. Some make a fixed allowance for gathering and shipping expense. No cowman is so hidebound that he expects you to incur expense without allowing for it. You ought to be able to cover all your round-up outlay, in gathering stray cattle for others.'

The boy was apt. 'Oh, well, if they allow us the expense of gathering and shipping,' said he, 'that's a cow of a different color.'

'Expense follows like feed-bills in shipping. Suppose you gather a carload of beeves for this man on

the Niobrara River, you summer and ship them for him, is he going to complain of your expense bill? Not if he's white. And what will it cost you? You must attend the round-ups, anyhow.'

'I have the idea,' said Joel, rising. 'We'll make out our brand-books to-night, when all the boys are in camp.'

'Let each one make out his own. Then it's his own writing, and he ought to be able to read his own brands. No other man can read my writing, and my brands look like quail tracks, or bear traps, or a lost bit of rope.'

An active week followed. The remuda was gathered and every horse put into trim. Joel made a hasty trip to the Republican, summoning the neighbors to the north to meet at their ranch, on or before the fifteenth day of May. Under orders of the home association, the work would begin in two divisions, and on the extreme ends of the range, tributary to the Arkansas River. This would require the brothers to send men on each division, and to be represented in a manner that admitted of no weakness on the outer, skirmish line. The spring round-up was held for the purpose of gathering the winter drift, and the ranch on the Beaver was conscious of having over a thousand cattle astray.

'Our neighbors are all ready,' reported Joel on his return, 'and will be here on the dot. Allowing six from our ranch, it looks like we might have fifty men with our two wagons. We'll provision and outfit at

Grinnell, from which place each outfit will start to join its division. Every one seems anxious for a clean round-up.'

They came like an army of invasion. Two men arrived from the Arickaree, in Colorado, five days in advance of the day set, their blankets and camp kit on a pack-horse. Every day added to the numbers, and on the evening of the 14th, the wagon from the Republican came in, the numbers totaling fifty-eight men, four of whom were cooks and wranglers. The men were mounted, with from six to eight horses each, numbering over three hundred head, the pick of the ranches and fit for the coming work.

The outfits were made up at the railroad. Sargent was elected captain over the wagon on the western division. Dell and Hamlet accompanied it, and started for Trail City at once. The other wagon bore off to the east, crossing the old Texas and Montana cattle trail, and expecting to strike the river fully fifty miles northeast of Dodge. The spring round-up would thus cover, in its meanderings, nearly two hundred miles of the Arkansas Valley.

Quinlin and Verne Downs were left at headquarters. The other three, Joel, Manly, and Bob Downs, joined the wagon from the Republican, and on parting at Grinnell, the six drew aside for a final conference. Two extra powers of attorney awaited them at the station, and, while copying the brands

into each one's book, Manly suggested to those going west a few timely hints.

'Now, you fellows lay low and shine only when there's work to do. When the captain on your division calls for men to rope a steer, night-herd, or ride on the outside circle, be the first to volunteer. Let your work speak for itself, and in no time it will leak out that those —— Y boys are cowmen. When you claim a cow, claim her for keeps. If any one cuts a steer back on you, don't argue; go to your captain and lodge your grievance. He's liable to be some old cowman, square and white, and he'll see that you get your due. There's always a lot of smart men at a round-up, claiming everything, and this one ought to bring every mother's son to the front. The only way to fade those fellows is to show them that you are the real thing, and that they are only Sunday men. Now, get these brands straight, and overtake your wagon.'

Aside from their own, the boys from the Beaver carried authority to gather sixty-three alien brands. Each trio read and re-read them, memorizing the names of the owners and the ranges, and before the different rendezvous were reached, each one had his work perfect. Gathering so many brands might provoke comment, but with written authority, properly attested, there was nothing to fear.

The general meeting-points were of marked interest to Joel and Dell Wells. This was their first round-up; they were thrown in contact with men

from other States, many of whom had started in a small way, and a touch with their kind served to broaden the brothers. Men from the mountains joined the western division, which numbered at starting over two hundred and fifty men and nearly two thousand horses. On the eastern division, the number of men and horses was slightly larger. It was the round-up following a severe winter, and calling for the best in men and mounts.

It was reasonable to suppose that all cattle adrift from the Beaver would lodge on the Smoky and Arkansas Rivers. The bulk of them ought to be found on the former watercourse, but, in consequence of the heavy drift, the entire range of the home organization would be covered.

The work began on time. In fact, the afternoon before the date set, an outside circle swung around, drifting every hoof into the valley. The night before beginning the work, captains over divisions were selected, with captains over wagons to execute general orders, twelve on the eastern and ten on the western. Each division would move to a meeting-point, work governing the pace, and carrying the cut of strays with it. The outside circle, an advance guard, led the work, shaping up the cattle, so that on the arrival of the main body, there was nothing to do but cut out all strays and move on. The strays were driven by a detail, like trail cattle, often missing a round-up and only joining the main camp at night. Each wagon had its own horse wrangler and

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cook, who moved ahead to noon and night camps, and answered to the orders of its own captain. All details of men were made from each wagon, and the rapidity with which a perfectly organized round-up handled cattle seemed marvelous. Ten thousand cattle was a small morning's work.

Each man cut his strays into a common herd. As the work progressed, this contingent was added to daily. On reaching home ranges, all strays were claimed. This required a morning hour, and every owner must serve notice where and when he would claim his strays, and the right of every man to pass on the same was granted. The brand governed ownership, from which there was no appeal.

The round-up numbered hundreds of Texans. From the moment of reaching the meeting-points, Jack Sargent and Joe Manly began seeking out old friends. In cattle countries the Texan transplants readily, clannish to the core, noticeable by his saddle poise, accuracy of eye, and the ease with which he does his work. All those from the Beaver, including the boys, were marked by their manners, of fair play, a willingness to lend a hand, which won them friends from the first hour. During the initial day's work, at a captain's request, Bob Downs roped and tied steers, to examine the brands, as willingly as he would have answered civil questions. Manly was asked to referee a number of brands, and no one questioned his decisions.

Allowing one for detail duty, two — Y men

were in the thick of every round-up. It mattered not how a cow passed, the trained eye caught the brand, and whether it was one in a thousand, or more, the men claimed their own. The first day was gratefully disappointing, not a stray from the Beaver being found, with only seven head of alien cattle gathered. The day's work was too far to the eastward to catch any home drift, and few were to be expected until the main round-up reached the big bend of the Arkansas River, below the old trail market of Dodge City.

The beginning of work on the western division was advanced a day. The quarantine grounds at Trail City were covered with cattle; through herds were expected soon, and an isolated range must be granted to trail cattle, direct from Texas. A local round-up, over the line in Colorado, in advance of beginning the work in Kansas, met the requirements. Twenty-five miles of the valley was covered in an immense circle, making four big round-ups, and at evening the Kansas cowmen crossed the line with over two thousand cattle.

Every stock association, to the north and northwest, had inspectors in each division. Even the Texas Panhandle was represented on the western end, not that cattle would drift north, but trail herds often carried stock astray, and the calling of the rustler was a reality. Sargent took the Texas inspector under his wing, made him welcome at his wagon, loaned him horses, and to outsiders, the range expert

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from the Panhandle passed as a——Y man. He was a quiet fellow, attracted no attention, yet with an eye and memory for brands which fully qualified him for the task.

The western division moved down the river like companies of cavalry. The eastern one marched up the same stream, each crossing the river as occasion required, and on the afternoon of the 31st, well above Dodge City, the details working on the outside circle, moving in advance, hailed each other. That night the divisions camped like opposing armies, and in the morning the two cuts of strays gathered were thrown together, numbering over seven thousand, and a general reassortment began. All cattle belonging on the Arkansas River or to the south would be cut out and sent to their ranges, as the next move was north to the Smoky River. The work required a full half-day. A dozen disputes arose over ownership, the captains laboring honestly to mete out justice, but the leaven of human greed, if not common theft, was present.

Cattle rustlers dreaded a round-up. It bared their work to an open inspection, and some one must answer, either in person or by proxy. A rustler might do his work by night, but the light of day formed the working hours of the round-up.

‘What do you claim that beef on?’ inquired the Panhandle inspector, whose name was Vance, of a man in the eastern division.

‘He’s a “Crescent eight” beef,’ loftily answered

the one addressed. 'Belongs to an old friend of mine in the Indian Nation.'

'Have you authority to gather the brand?' inquired Vance.

'Worked for him once; don't need any authority.'

'You ought to carry a power of attorney,' insisted the inspector.

'Who says so?' sneeringly inquired the claimant.

'I'll look at your authority and you may look at mine,' answered Vance, shaking out a rope. 'My claim is that the beef was once a "Half Circle S." We'll throw him and see. You may be right, and then again the brand may have been tampered with.'

'You'll throw no steer of mine,' threateningly said the man.

'Oh, yes, I will,' replied Vance, smiling; 'and what's more, I'll clip the brand. If he's your beef, I want you to have him.'

Without a further word, the inspector cut out the beef, an immense animal, caught him by the horns the first throw, while Hamlet heeled him, the dexterity of their work calling for applause. The big fellow was eased to the ground, hog-tied, when Vance dismounted, unearthed a clipper, and bared the brand until he who cared might read. That the original brand had been tampered with, altering the letter 'S' into the figure '8,' and changing a half-circle with an upper, outside curve, into a crescent, was too crude to pass inspection.

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'I'll take the beef,' simply said Vance. 'Turn him loose, Reil.'

In range parlance, it was the rustler's move. 'One moment,' said he, pleading for time. 'I'm not claiming that steer for myself, but for an old friend, a man I once worked for ——'

'You carry authority from your friend?' questioned the captain of the eastern division.

'There's no occasion to. 'I'll write him ——'

'The beef is yours, Mr. Vance,' interrupted the captain.

'Men, this is an outrage,' protested the rustler, with injured innocence. 'If this injustice took place on my home range, before I'd give up that steer, I'd fight the man who claimed him.'

'No, you wouldn't,' soothingly said the inspector, handing the card of his association to the rustler. 'My name is Vance, down on the corner, underscored, commonly called Jim Vance. I meet up with a good many men like you. They always bluff, and always wind up by threatening to shoot. The fact is, a cow-thief is always a coward, and all this bluff of burning powder is breath wasted; simply lets a rustler down easy. However, if I've wronged you, I'll give you the first shot.'

The beef was freed and turned back into the main herd. Dell and Joel were eager witnesses to the incident, the other Beaver men winking among themselves, inwardly gloating over each move. Vance won friends by the score, was welcome at any wagon, and

until the round-up ended, no one ever questioned his work.

The spring round-up of the Arkansas Valley was over. Fully fifteen thousand cattle were gathered, over half of which were sent direct to home ranges. Twelve outfits claimed their strays before the round-up moved, reducing the remnant to about three thousand, all of which belonged to the Smoky or to ranges farther north. Less than a hundred head from the Beaver were found, while the strays, gathered by proxy, more than doubled that number.

With little loss of time the main round-up started for the Smoky River. Its numbers were cut in half, no one looking to the north for cattle astray, and thereafter the work was carried on in a single division. Wagons were constantly joining in and dropping out, strays were claimed every morning, the main herd increasing its numbers slowly. A week was spent on the march up the Smoky and across to the Saline, a number of side round-ups were required, and as the work advanced the —— Y outfit came into action.

Each day brought results. Fully one hundred and fifty miles southeast of the home range, the missing cattle from the Beaver were encountered in numbers. All hands were excused from day duty, every gathering was combed to an animal, the condition of the strays being somewhat surprising.

‘That’s always the result,’ explained Sargent to

the brothers. 'Cattle adrift winter better than those under restraint. They shift about, halt on dry ranges, and as long as they move, they're immune to cold. It takes a little riding to bring them home again, but that's part of your tuition. We may be out three weeks, but every cow on the Beaver will go home with us. Your drift is going to run over a thousand head.'

On leaving the Smoky, it was largely a matter of neighborhood round-ups. Outfits were sent east and west of the general course, cattle were shaped up in advance, and allowing for delays, the captain announced the 15th of June as the end, with a round-up of the Wells ranch on the Beaver.

'Let us know a day or two in advance,' said Joel to the captain, 'and we'll have our cattle in shape. We'll send a man in home to notify the boys. About three round-ups, half a day's work, will cover our holdings.'

The last work before reaching the Beaver was on the North Fork of the Solomon. Every one from the Republican was pleased with results, and, as the herd of strays dropped into the old trail, heading north, it numbered fully four thousand head. It reached the lower end of the Wells Brothers' range in ample time on the 14th to trim the herd of Beaver cattle, and, after the work was over, Inspector Vance called Sargent and Joel aside.

'To-morrow lets me out,' said the inspector. 'I have gathered nearly a hundred head for my people,

and I'd like to leave them with you boys. Our association allows two dollars a head for summering and shipping all cattle found outside the State. I've shared your wagon and ridden your horses, and one good turn deserves another. Say so, and I'll cut mine out to-morrow.'

'Of course, we'll take them,' said Sargent, answering for Joel. 'Just give us a list of the brands gathered.'

'Manly thinks Mr. Stoddard is a member of the Panhandle association,' said Joel, to Sargent, rather than to the inspector.

'Dudley Stoddard?' questioned Vance. 'Why, he's one of the grand old men of our association. White as lamb'swool. Name and address right here in our brand-book. Oh, I know the terms on which you boys are holding these Lazy H cattle. Uncle Dud asked me to send him a private report.'

'We'll take yours,' simply said Joel, 'but there will be no charges. There's a tie between our ranch and you Texans. Just leave your brands.'



CHAPTER V

THE HOME ROUND-UP

THE spring work was nearly ended. A day's notice had been served on the Beaver Ranch, but instead of a few men available, no less than sixty were present. They had come from every quarter to meet the annual round-up, some even a long distance, including several wagons from the Republican, as the ending of work in Kansas was the beginning in Nebraska. In those early days the most perfect harmony existed among the different cattle associations.

The round-up found the ranch in waiting. Quinlin had directed the advance work, there being no lack of volunteer help. Evening found every animal grazed into the valley, the extreme ends of the range shortened, so that the cattle would bed along the creek and be easily found in the morning.

'Give me half a dozen men,' said Quinlin to Joel, 'and before ten o'clock, I'll bunch the cattle into three round-ups. One below and two above headquarters will show every hoof. Their condition? Glossy as summer silk. Read the brands as easily as their colors.'

Work was begun shortly after sunrise. Equal to his promise, Quinlin had the cattle quieted down and ready for the arrival of the main body of horsemen. On their arrival, the home men threw out a drag-net,

circling to cover half the remaining herd, and holding it fully an hour before again being relieved.

The work was slow. An unusually heavy drift had lodged on the Beaver, cattle from an extreme distance being found, while human depravity was certain to be present. A man might claim cattle on any pretext, and if there was no one to say him nay, his demand or right carried a certain validity. There were hundreds of unknown and unclaimed cattle in every day's gathering, and unless some one set up a claim, just or unjust, the flotsam was left on the range where found. Likewise they were of marked interest to the rustler, who claimed freely, and later moved them to some remote country, and after the brand had undergone a change and the animal a winter, owners were bold in claiming their cattle. The rustler was ever present, some of whom in the present instance had eaten the salt of the brothers; but the temptation to rustle cattle was a human frailty, and men well worthy of a better calling listened to the siren's song. 'Lead us from temptation' was not in their creed.

The home ranch extended every courtesy. In a sense, every one in attendance was a guest of the brothers, and the duty of showing their cattle, holding each round-up and cut separate, rested with the ranch outfit. Such assistance as was volunteered was gratefully received in shaping the herd for inspection and in rendering every possible aid in hastening the work.

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As foreman of the ranch, Sargent detailed three of his own men to hold the cut, the others, not on the outside circle, holding the main round-up. Near the end of the first work of the day, some one cut out a roan cow, a gift to Dell in the beginning of their operations, and the boy sensed danger. He knew every animal in the original nucleus by flesh marks, many of them carrying names, and could have pointed them out without brands from a thousand of their fellows. He was alarmed, appealed to his friends on watch, when another cow, carrying the 'hospital brand,' or Two Bars, was cut out as a stray.

'Lay low,' said Hamlet to Dell, 'and spot the man who's cutting out your cows. Mark him, and we'll look if there's wool in his teeth. Certain to be some sheep-killing cur.'

Several others were cut out, by three different men, and when the first round-up was turned loose, no less than a dozen head of home cattle had been claimed. In holding the cut, one of the boys from the Republican, who had worked on the Beaver the fall before, was lending a hand and fell into conversation with Dell, and his men. He knew the home cattle and had spotted the rustlers, and in response to Dell's anxiety, volunteered to make inquiry.

'All I know about them,' said he to the Beaver men, 'is that they are from the Crazy Woman, in Wyoming. They claim to have left their wagon on the Republican, only bringing a pack-horse to the

Beaver. There are men here from Wyoming who ought to know them. I'll make inquiry. Keep tab on them.'

'Trust that to us,' said Bob Downs. 'If they get away with a single hoof belonging to this range, I'll never look another cow in the face.'

Unaware of any underhand work, Sargent and Joel joined the home trio, to assist in drifting the cut, then numbering nearly five hundred cattle, to the next round-up above. When the facts were laid before the foreman, he flashed angry, but Hamlet jollied him, and he swung to the other extreme, laughing openly.

'Well, they've got their nerve right with them,' admitted Sargent. 'Brought it along a-purpose, I reckon, to show us something new. Leave it to me, boys. I'll lead them out and let them run on the rope; let them enjoy their brief hour. Come on, Dell, and spot out your friends to me.'

Joel took Dell's trick with the cut at the next round-up, which was in waiting only a few miles above on the Beaver. The first cut of the day was drifted up, causing a short delay, but admitting of ample time to take Manly into confidence, the only object being to locate definitely those engaged in cutting the Two Bar cattle. Meanwhile the lad from the Republican was gleaning chaff, getting such information as he could from cowmen, known ranchmen from Wyoming, in whom reliance could be placed. A comparison of brands, or who a man was,

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or whom he represented, was entirely too common a question to provoke suspicion. The ends of the range gathered at these annual events, and who's who was on every tongue.

Sargent located his men. Not an advance was made, and only a friendly inquiry, 'if he was finding any of his cattle,' passed between the foreman and the suspects. One of the latter, at the very beginning of the work, cut a Two Bar beef, an animal which had fallen to the brothers when a yearling.

'You are cutting these Two Bar strays?' inquired Sargent affably. 'You'll find quite a drift of them on this range.'

'I had no idea that our cattle had drifted this far,' replied a blond suspect addressed. 'It simply beats all outdoors how cattle drifted last winter.'

'Same report everywhere,' observed the foreman, entering the round-up with the rustler. 'We're just getting home. Went as far south as the Arkansaw. I'm foreman on this range. There's a Two Bar cow.'

Sargent even assisted in cutting out the animal. 'Trim us up,' said he, at parting. 'This range has never known a clean round-up. There's no money in furnishing grass for these northern strays.'

The rustler took the bait like a bass. He and his partners trimmed the second gathering of the morning, to the last possible hoof of Two Bar cattle. Had a single grain of caution been theirs, the numbers found in the brand would justify an owner or representative at the round-up. But an inordinate greed



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CUT A TWO BAR BEEF, AN ANIMAL WHICH HAD FALLEN TO THE BROTHERS WHEN A YEARLING

swayed them, and not content, near the end of the work, they were cutting everything not in the two ranch brands.

'Looks like they were out to claim a-plenty,' remarked Sargent to Manly. 'Claiming a cow is only one move. Making a claim stand up is another story. Right now, those fellows are taking under line, cork, and pole. Aren't they running on the rope nicely? We'll have to watch our saddle horses. And I hear that they've been eating regular with the ranch for a week.'

'Nerve is a rustler's capital,' answered Manly. 'Some one must have given them a tip that all the holdings of this ranch were in the —— Y and Lazy H brands. And they're not a little bit afraid of biting off more than they can chew. When they run to the end of their rope, won't they fall hard!'

Dell and the lad from the 'Republican rode up. 'They're from the Hole-in-the-Wall country,' said the latter. 'None of these Wyoming cowmen care to say much; don't want to make enemies. All that they care to say is that they'll do to watch.'

'From the Hole-in-the-Wall country,' repeated Sargent, grateful for the information. 'Bad men from Bitter Creek, more than likely. From the upper forks of the creek, where all the bad ones come from, the real, cotton-mouth reptile! I'm beginning to get scared.'

Quinlin showed the holdings on the Beaver in three round-ups. The last was the largest, over three

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thousand cattle, and requiring fully an hour's work. The strays gathered on the first two circles were not brought up; a new cut was started, as everything would be taken down to headquarters for the final sorting over. The main cut, the gathering of three weeks' work, was under herd, and would also come up for a re-sorting during the afternoon.

While riding together from the second to the last round-up, Sargent took the captain, an old cowman, into his confidence, and asked him to watch the work of this trio of rustlers. He indicated the ones by their horses, their work, their brazen effrontery, and the usual tactics of a cow-thief. He even gave the captain the history of the Two Bar brand; that they originally were strays, dropped from passing trail herds, abandoned cattle, crumbs that fell by the wayside, gifts to orphan boys, who had befriended the wayfaring man and succored his cattle, the sick and the wounded. Also, that the Two Bars was simply a tally-mark and not a token of ownership.

Sargent had asked for shelter, stricken with dengue fever, at the tent of the brothers, and was now their earnest advocate. 'You may be called on to act as referee this afternoon,' continued the ranch foreman to the captain. 'Any man from Texas who claims one of these cows can have her, but no rustler from the upper country can look at her last year's track. Cattle don't drift north, and the presence of these can be accounted for. They came up with trail

herds, and that tally mark is known to hundreds of men as the "Hospital Brand."

'On the last round-up, I'll keep an eye over their work,' agreed the captain. Since our meeting you — Y boys have proved yourselves square men. Rustling must be frowned down, stamped out. Every time we have a big winter drift, it produces a new crop of rustlers.'

The work was finished well before noon. The old captain sat his horse midway between the cut and the herd, carefully noting the flow of cattle pouring out of the latter, reading the brands, a friendly word of inquiry with every one, until the work came to an end. Man after man rode out of the herd, saying, 'Turn them loose; I'm through. Start the cut for camp.'

'Wait a few minutes,' was Sargent's request. 'There may be a stray or two left. We want to give every man a fair show. That's what this round-up's for.'

Half the men in attendance started for the wagons. A great clamor was raised about burning time, with none but the three suspects left in the herd, the outfit starting and halting impatiently.

'Give us a minute more time,' said a one-eyed rustler to Sargent. 'Give us a chance! We have cattle here yet!'

'Hold that cut,' ordered the foreman. 'Come on, you — Y men and lend these boys a hand in getting out their drift. It must not be said that we

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turned a round-up loose with stray cattle in it, before the very eyes of their owners. Now, point out your cows, and my men will do the rest. Just indicate which ones and we'll cut them out.'

Fully twenty more were cut out. With the rustlers directing the work, every one danced attendance, while two thirds of the cattle claimed belonged in brands which the brothers held written authority to gather, and hence were not molested by others.

'Turn them loose,' finally said a freckle-faced spokesman for the rustlers. 'That's about all.'

'Are you through?' inquired Sargent. 'No trouble at all to hold this round-up a few minutes longer. It's the last one to-day. Trim us down to the last hoof.'

'We're satisfied,' replied the blond rustler. 'We're not gathering very close this spring. Anything that we leave will be picked up by the inspectors of our association, when the cattle go to market. Many thanks for your help.'

'Don't mention it,' bowed the foreman. 'Only too glad to help a neighbor. By the way, where are these brands owned that you boys are gathering?'

'In Wyoming,' answered the one-eyed man.

'That's rather indefinite,' laughed Sargent, 'but it'll do. We're only too glad to get rid of this rabble of strays. If every one gathered as close as you do, we'd have a clean range.'

They turned homeward. A wave of the hand started the cut for camp, and another sent the herd

adrift up the valley. The morning work was over. All told, over seventeen hundred cattle had been gathered, and were drifting into headquarters where the wagons were encamped for dinner. Every one was in gala spirits; the spring round-up was over in western Kansas, and the men were eager for home. The Beaver outfit, in particular, were in fine fettle, but managed to drop to the rear for a final conference.

‘Sing that good old song, “There’s one more river to cross, and that river is Jordan,”’ said some one, dismounting at the wagons. A babel of voices replied, ‘It’s the Republican — we’ll cross it to-morrow! It’s the South Fork of the Solomon — we have crossed it! We won’t cross it before July; it’s the Niobrara!’ Every one was loyal to his own river.

Dinner over, a change of horses, another hour’s work, and each one would go his way. Meanwhile, the three contingents of cattle were thrown together in the valley below headquarters, and the final sorting began. Those going southeast joined work and cut out first, were passed upon, and started. All going north would hold together, and there only remained a wave of the hand, on the part of the brothers or their foreman, to start the main herd for the Republican.

There was a distinct pause. ‘Are you satisfied with this morning’s work?’ inquired the old captain of Joel.

‘Just a moment,’ mildly replied young Wells. ‘I

want to look at the authority of those boys gathering Two Bar cattle. From Wyoming, I hear. Your papers, please.' Joel nodded to the suspects.

The one addressed smiled. 'Why, I need no authority,' said he. 'I'm gathering my own cattle.'

'Then your name and association will answer as well,' urged the boy, unearthing brand-books covering Wyoming.

The two others jumped their horses into the circle of inquiry. 'We're not members of any association,' continued the first speaker. 'We're free lances.'

'Who's kicking?' inquired the big blond of his partner. 'Who wants to know? Who's questioning our cattle?'

'As one of the owners of this ranch, I am,' answered Joel.

The big blond laughed openly. 'You grasshopper kids make me tired. Expect to show us boys from Wyoming where the creek does really fork! Talk about gall!'

Joel turned to the captain. 'Here are powers of attorney,' said he, handing his authority to the old cowman, 'for our ranch to gather sixty-three outside brands. These free lances have claimed no less than one hundred of these cattle this morning. Here's my authority, and I insist on seeing theirs. I make my appeal to you, as captain and general referee.'

The old cowman looked over the papers. 'I'll look at yours,' said he, addressing the other contestants.

'Well, now, captain,' said the one-eyed stranger,

'you ought to know the general custom governing such matters. I own this Two Bar brand outright, and these other boys are working within their just rights. Because we're a little distance from home is no reason that we're not on the square.'

'The question of authority has been raised,' said the captain, 'and you must show your hand or lay down. I noticed you this morning cutting cattle that Wells Brothers hold authority to gather. There's only one way to clear up the matter: Show your hand.'

'Well, we'll show you Jayhawkers a trick with a hole in it,' said the big blond, easing a six-shooter forward on its belt. 'We'll take these cattle, and you can suck our thumbs.'

'That kind of talk wins nothing,' said the old captain, with decision. 'Every one here must stand four square.'

'Do you dare to intimate that we're rustlers?' insisted the same speaker, jumping his horse to the captain's side.

'He needn't,' said Sargent, taking the blond rustler's horse by the bridle; 'I will for him. And what's more, I'll not intimate a single word. When the time comes to lead your horse out of this round-up, I'll lead him out. It's almost books with you now.'

'You —— You ——' stammered the big blond. 'You helped us to cut out these strays. You claimed to be foreman here.'

'Yes, dear. I noticed you were rustlers, and gave

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you plenty of rope. I knew you'd hang yourself. Shall I lead your horse out and give you directions home?'

'Don't even try it! It might be the last horse you'd ever lead out of a round-up.'

'Now, don't scare any one,' urged the foreman in dulcet tones. 'We've all heard it thunder and it snowed on us last winter. You'd better take your doll rags and go. Consider yourself at liberty to go.'

'Well, of course, on anything that you hold authority to gather, we'll waive our rights,' said the one-eyed man. 'No one contests my right to the Two Bar brand.'

'Not only that brand,' answered Sargent, 'but every hoof of the two hundred or more cattle that you claimed this morning.'

'Show me the man who contests my right to these Two Bar cattle,' insisted the claimant.

'I represent him,' said the foreman, smiling. 'Your claim is bogus, the claim of a common cow-thief.'

'How's that?' chorused the trio. 'Careful now,' cautioned one.

'You fellows are such coarse liars,' continued Sargent. 'Under this day's sun, one of you told me that any cattle that you left on this range, the inspectors of your association would pick up when the beeves were marketed. Now, you're free lances; belong to no cattle organization. Of course you don't. No cow-thief ever does. Your work's too coarse. You talk too much.'

'All of which is easy to say,' observed the one-eyed claimant of the hospital strays. 'Would you mind naming my contestant to this Two Bar brand?'

'I know the history of that brand. You may have noticed that no two cows in it are in the same original ranch brand. We're delaying good people, and I won't honor your claim by discussing it with you. How about it, captain?'

'Trim the herd,' replied the old cowman. 'The claim of these Wyoming men is too weak to pass currency. It doesn't come up to the standard of our association.'

'You decide against us?' protested the freckle-faced rustler. The captain nodded. 'Then I want to serve notice now that I'll bring an outfit this fall and trim this ranch clean for once.'

'I'll be right on the job when you do,' smiled the foreman. 'Come on, boys, and let's retrim this herd. Hold up your cattle and every one lend a hand.'

The ranch outfit led the work. Twenty men followed them, cutting out all Two Bar cattle and gathered strays. Dell and Joel pointed out the original nucleus, known by name, brand, and flesh marks, while willing horsemen cut them adrift. Those from the home ranch, who had been out on the general round-up and were familiar with the brands gathered by proxy, cut the strays to an animal. Over two hundred and fifty head were turned back, the work not requiring to exceed twenty minutes.

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Bluffing to the end, the rustlers held the cut, and once the ranch outfit rode out of the main herd, every one was invited to pass on the cattle claimed. Not a man made a protest, except the rustlers.

'Of course, you've got your round-up behind you,' whined the one-eyed man, 'but I own the bulk of these cattle.'

'Point out a single cow,' urged Sargent.

'That red "Acorn" cow,' replied the man, deeply grieved.

'On the Acorn, or on the Two Bars?'

'On the Acorn.'

'You couldn't have her if she had acorns on both sides. That Two Bar brand will hold her for the present. Now, just because you can't steal a single cow, don't cry, don't bleed to death.'

'You might bleed to death yet,' insisted the big blond. 'You might have to smell powder, at short range, over these cattle yet.'

'Show me how straight you can shoot,' tauntingly replied the foreman. 'Take a shot at me now.'

There was no reply. Vance, inspector for the Texas Panhandle, relieved the tensiety of the moment by addressing Joel. 'I might lay a valid claim on several of these Two Bar cows,' said he, 'but since I know the history of the brand, I'll advise their owners and you boys can buy them.'

'By all means,' answered Joel. 'We'll buy the cows.'

'By the way,' continued the Texas inspector, ad-

dressing the one-eyed rustler, 'haven't I met you before, on the spring round-up, in Colorado, two years ago?'

'No such recollection,' he replied, covering his defective eye.

'My memory for brands and faces has fed and clothed me for years past. I remember you well. We had a tilt over some strays once. From the Hole-in-the-Wall country, aren't you?'

Without reply, the man turned and rode away. One by one the other two made excuses, the gathering relaxed, when one of the men from the Republican shouted orders to start the herd.

'And be sure and take these Wyoming rustlers with you,' added Sargent. 'Otherwise, we'll have to night-herd our horses.'

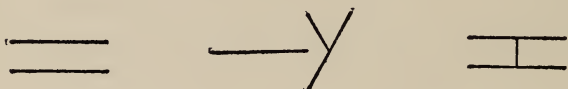
'When we elect a captain to-morrow night,' replied an old cowman from the Republican, 'those fellows will have to show a clean bill of health or hit the trail.'

Hails and farewells were shouted. Every one went his way. Vance, alone, was left at the Wells Ranch.

'That's what gets me,' said he, as the Beaver outfit turned toward headquarters. 'Those fellows are experts on brands. Why they want to rustle, when they might hold good jobs, is a horse on me. I never owned a cow in my life, and I'm welcome anywhere a wagon's camped. Look at those fellows, sneaking away like sheep-killing dogs. I don't understand them.'

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‘They’re too smart for common cowhands,’ said Manly, ‘and haven’t sense enough to hold good jobs. Look how those fellows dug a pit and fell into it to-day. I never saw a cow-thief in my life that had horse-sense. They simply have no sabe.’



CHAPTER VI

BETWEEN THE MILLSTONES

THE spring round-up was over. The ranch on the Beaver was elated with the results. Where a thousand cattle were expected adrift, the outfit had returned with fully twelve hundred of their own, with strays enough to pay all winter and current expenses. The effect on the brothers was a valuable experience, affording them a deeper grasp on their occupation, giving them confidence, and otherwise broadening them by and large. The greed of their fellow men, tempted and fallen to the point of outcasts, the test of true men, the right triumphant, were lessons that the boys absorbed.

The acquaintance of Inspector Vance was worth while. He was sent here and there by his association, to round-ups, to markets, cutting trail crossings; he was simple, affable, yet a fearless man within his rights. He had served his native State as a ranger, carried scars from gunshot wounds in clashing with criminals, and was now in the employ of one of the strongest cattle associations in the known world. Inspector Vance was truly a man of his day.

‘When can you drop me on the railroad?’ he inquired the evening after the home round-up. ‘I’m liable to be sent to Saint Louis again during the beef-shipping season. Our people have inspectors on every

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market during the run of range beef. But I want to go home first. You see, I have a wife and babies, and they like to see me now and then.'

'We'll go in the morning,' answered Manly, nodding to Joel.

'To-day lets me out. I'll write a letter to Uncle Dud, and let it beat me home about three days. I'll report your winter-kill and other losses under one per cent. When I get home, you can depend on me telling our winter and spring work, high, wide, and handsome.'

'What's your hurry?' inquired Joel, looking from Vance to Manly. 'Why not rest your saddles a few days?'

'Hamlet may stay,' protested the latter. 'Your work's over until the beef-shipping season begins. You haven't a thing to do but ride fat horses. Oh, I'm as good as gone. The way I will rear up my feet and tell it wild and woolly will be some happenstance. You heard me! Zizzaparoola!'

There was cause for rejoicing. The future outlook of the ranch on the Beaver was rosy. It would be able to send to the market, that fall, two thousand beeves, which meant further independence. The only cloud on the horizon was the settlement of three families, homesteaders, in the same valley, and not over ten or twelve miles below the old trail crossing. There was no conflict of interest; in fact, the presence of the settlers was an advantage. But their coming cast a shadow. Others might come, and there was no

way whereby the brothers could ever hope to own the land on which their cattle grazed. It was subject to homestead only. They simply filled the niche between their Indian predecessors and the sturdy, home-loving settler. Further, it set a limit on the present range of the brothers. And with youth and ambition pulsing high, having tasted success, the shadow remained as a warning that the boys had reached their limitations on the Beaver.

There was no holding Manly longer, and Joel agreed to take him and the inspector to the railroad. The evening was spent in writing letters, the older boy even penning one to the commission firm in Kansas City.

'Manly says there's nothing to do,' said Joel the next morning, mounting his horse, 'but you boys might scatter the cattle a little more evenly over the range. Oh, yes, Dale: Dell knows our three gentle cows, and you might take them down to those settlers whose acquaintance you made while we were away. I remember, when we took this homestead, it was a struggle to get enough to eat. Explain to those folks that the calves fall to this ranch, but that they are welcome to the cows. And you might make inquiry if any of them could help us during the beef-shipping season.'

On reaching the station, a letter from the commission firm was awaiting the brothers. Its contents covered Joel's report as fully as his own to them. There was nothing unusual in the coincidence; all

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were deeply interested in the result of the spring work. In addition, there was just a vague hint that another ranch, on the Arickaree, in Colorado, for which the firm acted as factor, might be called to account for negligence in not making the proper effort to gather their winter drift. Inquiry as to the distance between it and the Wells Ranch was direct.

‘What do you think?’ inquired the boy, after reading the letter to Manly. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It might mean several things,’ answered Manly, glancing over the letter. ‘It seems that a second report is awaited. If it is not satisfactory, some one must answer. Where is the Arickaree?’

‘It’s the North Fork of the Republican,’ answered Vance. ‘Where can we find a map?’

‘At the depot,’ answered Joel, leading the way.

Reference to a folder not only confirmed the statement of the inspector, but revealed the fact that the main Republican forked not over one hundred miles northwest of the Beaver Ranch.

‘Why, we were almost on the Arickaree last fall,’ said Manly, studying the map. ‘We met your Trail City cattle on the South Fork of the Republican. It can’t be far north to the Arickaree.’

‘The new trail to Ogalalla calls it twenty miles,’ answered Vance. The inspector was an authority on any range question.

‘By the way, what became of those two Arickaree men who joined your wagon, a few days before we left the Beaver?’ inquired Manly of Joel.

'They went with Sargent's wagon on the western division.'

'Tin-horn gamblers,' explained Manly to Vance. 'Any ranch that they worked for was poorly represented.'

'I remember the pair,' said the inspector. 'Sargent invited them to hunt another wagon. To avoid work, they always had the ready excuse. It was either they weren't expecting to find any of their cattle until the Smoky was reached, or their horses were too weak, or they were detailed to drift the cut. They were so insulted by Sargent that they quit the round-up. They weren't looking for cattle; all they wanted was a card game. Claimed they would meet their wagon when the Colorado work began.'

'Those are the ones,' said Joel. 'But they represented some ranch. At least they showed me their brand-book; men from the Republican knew the outfit, a cattle company. Sargent claims he saw hundreds of their cattle on the Arkansaw and Smoky.'

'If those old boys are the ones sent out to gather the cattle that this commission firm is inquiring about,' hazarded Manly, 'then it's a cinch that their strays are still adrift.'

'It won't be the first instance,' said the inspector. 'That's what makes rustlers so bold. There are so many flat-heads managing cattle companies. The son-in-law of the president is appointed superintendent, and what he doesn't know about cattle would make a very large book. And there you are!'

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The boy briefly answered the letter. The two trusty men went their way. While riding home, conjecture was rife with Joel. What did the letter mean? The boy had a vague idea that the firm might be looking for a foreman.

Sargent took a broader view. 'The fact that this commission house is uneasy,' said he, letter in hand, 'shows that there's money involved. Capital is a timid thing. It will rush into a wild-cat venture, and break its neck trying to get out. Whoever financed this cattle company would like to see his money again. That's my guess.'

'Do you remember those two fellows from the Arickaree who started on the round-up with us?' inquired Joel. 'Manly had an idea that they might have been in the employ of this cattle company. Do you remember the brands?'

'Yes, some half-dozen,' replied the foreman. 'Any ranch they represented ought to be uneasy. I'll venture that we saw over five hundred stray cattle in their brands, and no one had authority to gather the drift. A widow woman might run a ranch that way, but cowmen — well, they must be poor, weak sisters!'

The month of June was nearing its end when a special messenger arrived at the Wells Ranch. He carried a telegram from the old factor, Major Hunt, to the brothers, urging them to come into the city at once. Dell was impatient to start the same evening, but Joel and Sargent weighed the situation to a fraction.

'You must go with us,' said the older boy to the foreman. 'I'm liable to act too slow or too hasty, but you have the years and the caution. You can look a cow in the face and tell what's on her mind. I want you along.'

Sunrise found all three on their way. On reaching the city, the discovery was made that they were hardly presentable, but lack of pocket money compelled economy. On the range, dress ran to the extremities, to the most expensive boots and hats, while the remainder was a matter of indifference.

'Let's make it a haircut all around,' said Sargent. 'Then a new shirt apiece, a collar and a tie, and we'll just splash into the office and ask for the Major. We can drop our ragged coats off the bridge, and blow in on them in our shirt-sleeves. We'll not need our coats again this summer, anyhow.'

The programme of the foreman was adopted. The boys were expected at the office, and were hailed on their appearance. Major Hunt took each by the hand, and, after a few personal inquiries, led the way to his private office. On the part of the office force, the foreman observed a marked courtesy, which convinced him that an emergency existed, something urgent, which was unnoticed by the boys. Bankruptcy was almost written in the faces of the others.

'I have sent for you,' said Major Hunt, 'to hold a council. This cattle company on the Arickaree has been using a large amount of outside funds. We have acted as agents in placing loans, including some of

our own capital. Up to within a year or so the company seemed to be working on a sound basis, but recently some alarm has been felt over the money advanced. This spring we have gone so far as to take an invoice of the company holdings. It was completed last week, after the spring round-up was over, and the cattle tallied out twenty-five hundred short. No one seems to know head from tail, and the creditors must look to their own protection.'

The old factor went into all the details at hand. 'We know the holdings of the company; its original numbers, young cattle purchased within two years, its shipments, and here is this big shortage. The ranch offers the excuse that it was not equipped with saddle horses to cover all the round-ups. But that is locking the stable after the horse is stolen. They ought to have bought fewer cattle and more horses. The creditors now face a loss. The company offers to make an assignment. But its liability is limited to its original capital.'

'Can we help you in any way?' inquired Joel.

'We have just had your recent report, confirmed by Mr. Stoddard, regarding the winter on the Beaver, the result of the round-up, and your outlook for marketable beef this fall. Cattle on the Beaver and the Arickaree ought to fare alike during a winter. How do you account for this big shortage on the North Fork of the Republican?'

Joel glanced at Sargent. 'In many ways,' answered the latter. 'The company may work a sorry

outfit. Or it may be the big auger, the superintendent.'

'Now you're coming close,' said the old man. 'The company changed managers two years ago, and its downfall dates from that hour.'

'That often happens,' observed the foreman. 'We came home with our winter drift. And it was no light one. We don't indulge in any red tape at our ranch, but we can account for every Lazy H steer turned over to us last fall.'

'Have you a list of this company's brands?' inquired Dell.

'One minute,' said the senior member, excusing himself and leaving the room.

'Don't ask too many questions,' whispered Sargent to the brothers. 'Let the old man do the talking. He's worried twice as much as you are already. Leave the brands to me.'

Major Hunt returned, handing a list of the brands to Dell. The latter merely glanced over them, passing the memorandum on to the foreman. The latter read them aloud. 'We met some of these brands,' said he, 'on the spring round-up. Why, this company was represented. Their men threw in with our wagon for over a week. They were looking for a poker game, though, instead of these brands. I recognize the outfit now. Small wonder if they didn't catch their winter drift. If they had been half as active as the rustlers were, they wouldn't be as short as many cattle.'

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'Now you're throwing light on the situation,' commented the old factor. 'Now you're confirming my suspicions. The winter drift was heavy, a regular harvest for rustlers. That's what worries me. Twenty-five hundred cattle astray!'

Major Hunt fairly paced the room. Several times he paused, as if on the point of speaking, then resumed his walk. 'Well,' finally said he, picking up the broken thread, 'there's no use crying over spilt milk. It occurred to me that you boys were in a position to take over this unfortunate company. The two ranges are not so far apart but that one management would cover both. You are making a success maturing beef, and there seems to be no good reason why you should not enlarge your business. Here's a chance to prove neighbor unto us.'

'Oh, if you need a foreman,' spoke up Sargent, 'I can get you an all-round cowman. Good men are plentiful. All you need is cow-sense to pick them.'

'That's what I'm trying to do now,' protested the old factor, 'trying to get these boys to help me drop a hot iron. We're merely factors in the business, not ranchmen; we're a necessary link in the chain. What I want to do is to sell the holdings of this company outright to Wells Brothers.'

'Oh, now I catch your idea,' said the foreman, meditating with assumed innocence.

Joel turned away. 'Our credit is under a heavy strain just now,' said he. 'We won't buy a cow until

after the beef shipping ends. Mr. Stoddard comes first ——'

'Mr. Stoddard has recommended you. He is one of the creditors of this unfortunate company.'

The brothers looked from one to the other and turned to Sargent. A loss to Mr. Stoddard came like a call to fight fire, threatening a neighbor's house. 'Of course,' stammered Joel, 'if Mr. Stoddard is liable to lose ——'

'Give us a line on the situation,' said the foreman, alert and eager. 'We'll throw a rope to Uncle Dudley any day.'

The old man went into the details of the company's affairs. Its assets called for ten thousand cattle, a remuda of seventy-five saddle horses, twenty sections of land, ranch equipment, comfortable quarters, stabling, and line-camps.

'The land was so taken as to cover fifteen miles of the Arickaree,' he explained, 'which gives you control of the water. The cattle in hand, given a year's time, without interest, will pay the liabilities. You must look for your profit in the cattle adrift. If you're cowmen, here's your chance.'

Sargent thrilled at the challenge in the old man's voice. 'My brother claims to be a cowman,' he admitted 'and these boys hope to be some day. Give us a little time to talk it over among ourselves, and we'll drop in this afternoon. Your offer is the ranch outright for its debts to date. Your guarantee is that there are seventy-five hundred cattle in hand, at present, on the ranch.'

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'Our recent tally shows those numbers,' asserted Major Hunt.

'Come on, boys,' said the foreman, turning on his heel. 'We'll be back this afternoon.'

The three practical ones passed out of the room. Instead of returning to town, they wandered away through the cattle yards to a remote corner. Sargent smoothed the dust to a level, and with his finger drew a map of the Republican River.

'Here's your ranch on the Beaver,' said he, 'and about there is this other one on the Arickaree. Last winter's storms struck both alike, and the cattle drifted about the same course. Every hoof adrift can be picked up this fall during the beef round-ups. Mount and give me an outfit of fifteen men and I'll gather them for you. If you must make your profits out of the cattle adrift, they're there. I saw them! It's a snap, a cinch!'

'We owe for three thousand cattle now,' protested Joel.

'That's one ranch; this is another. A thousand beeves will pay every dollar the Beaver owes. Let every tub rest on its own bottom. I wouldn't give a whoop for a cowman who wouldn't strain his credit. These people are anxious to take a chance on you. They can't ride to the front and we can. Chances like this one don't come every day. Pick this one up. Take a chance. It's an ill wind that don't blow some one home. If it's an honest failure, there's a fortune in those cattle astray.'

'It would all depend on gathering the cattle astray,' meditated the older boy.

'Take the chance,' urged the foreman. 'You have the time and the horses. You're not buying a pig in a sack. We can go to the Arickaree and tally the cattle for ourselves. No one can sell us a lost or salted mine. This is a cattle deal, and we're supposed to be cowmen. The original capital of this company is wiped out, lost. Possibly we can find the leakage.'

Joel was the only cautious one of the trio. The liabilities were heavy, and the inducement of a year without interest, on any balance unpaid, was little incentive to the risk involved. They sauntered back through the yards, Dell and Sargent enthusiastic, with the older boy protesting every step.

During the early afternoon the trio returned to the office. 'All we will agree to do,' said Joel to Major Hunt, 'is to go to the Arickaree and tally out the cattle in sight. After that we can talk to you.'

'And if we can see a cow, or a horse, or an acre of land above the debts, we'll tackle your ranch,' added the foreman. 'If we ain't cowmen, we'll do until you can send for the real thing.'

'That's the talk I like to hear,' said the old factor aggressively. 'After you pass on the cattle in hand, let me know. We're not trying to saddle a dead horse on any one. This is a case of standing together and coming out on top together. Mr. Stoddard has faith in you, and I have faith in the ability of you

boys to ride to the front and turn failure to success. If any one can do it, you can. Stretch forth your hand and save us.'

'We can try it,' frankly said Dell.

The three turned toward the door. 'The deal depends,' said Joel, 'on how the cattle count out on the Arickaree. If they come up to expectations, we'll take the ranch and its holdings.'

All turned back and shook hands with Major Hunt. The old man was touched, so helpless was he, but in the spoken word of two boys and their foreman, hope rested.

CHAPTER VII

THE MILL RUNS ON

'OFF for the Arickaree!' shouted Sargent the next morning, as three horsemen dashed up to and dismounted at headquarters. 'You've all heard of the man who bought a bee course, and the one who traded for a ferry-boat which, four years before, went down the river in a flood. Well, we're no kin to either of those two, but we are entertaining a deal to buy a ranch and ten thousand cattle, one fourth of which are said to be astray. The job calls for cowmen, and the impression seems to have leaked out that this ranch is just about the mustard. Anyhow, we're off to the Arickaree in the morning. When this outfit lays its tape on the assets of the ranch, we'll know if it's a trade.'

The ranch was astir at dawn. Again leaving Quinlin and Verne Downs in charge on the Beaver, five men and thirty horses made up the detail to go to the Arickaree. As a forced ride was in order, neither blanket nor pack-horse was taken along.

'We'll travel as light as jack-rabbits,' said the foreman at starting. 'We might take a cold biscuit apiece in our saddle pockets, for dinner to-day, and before night we'll strike ranches on the Republican. We'll forage off the country, and a night or two with-

out sleep is nothing. The orders call for a forced march.'

The trip was a gala outing. On reaching the Republican, directions were secured, the ride timed so as to reach ranches at night, and on the evening of the third day, the cavalcade rode into the headquarters of the cattle company. Advice of their coming had reached the ranch the day before, and an ex-foreman, McWilliams by name, was found in charge, and he extended every courtesy.

'On their return from the round-up,' said the latter, 'most of our men were hit with a time check and your unexpected visit finds us short-handed. However, I've asked our neighbors to lend a hand and we'll show you the cattle. I've been crippled two years now and never ride beyond the home range any more.'

The retired foreman proved to be a Texan, mild in voice, and in no time he and Sargent were as thick as old cronies. The ranch books were produced, and, after checking shipments against original stock, increase, young steers purchased, making due allowance for winter-kill, there was every reason to believe that the ranch should count out more cattle than represented.

'How do you account for this big shortage?' inquired the Beaver foreman of the man on the Arickaree.

'I'm not answering many questions,' replied the latter with a shrug, but smiling. 'I've been with the

company since it was organized, ten years ago. We started in a small way and done well up to the boom of ten years ago. Since then, we have had a great deal of red tape to contend with. Too many big augers at company headquarters, and too many worthless gimlets on the ranch. I was relieved some two years ago, by an accident, of the active management. Since then the superintendent, from the main office, has directed the company affairs.'

The simple facts of the failure had been indirectly told. The calling was an old one, its maxims simple, yet from the dawn of Time some scored success where others failed. Even for the earth to yield its bounty, the farmer must either hold the plough or drive, and the same holds true in pastoral pursuits. 'My old hat,' said a cowman to his boys, 'is worth more to this ranch than half a dozen hirelings. My presence makes fat cattle, and one eye is enough to keep my saddle stock fit for work.'

A day's delay occurred in securing help. The time was fully employed in looking over the range and ranch equipment. The Arickaree carried a larger volume of water than the Beaver, the grasses were similar, while the improvements were vastly superior to the dug-outs and sod stabling of Wells Brothers. The boys and their foreman took in every detail, and closed the day's inspection by asking to have the remuda corralled. It tallied out in numbers, but not enough horses for the cattle represented.

'I've been pleading for more horses,' said Mc-

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Williams, in apology, 'but never could convince the big augers. Take a city man and he can't grasp the fact that eight or ten grass horses are necessary to mount a man. At least, I failed to convince mine. We managed to get along, in a way, but ——' A shrug ended the sentence.

Meanwhile outriders had circled the range during the afternoon, shaping up the cattle for the morrow. The water controlled about twenty miles of the Arickaree Valley, the best lands of which had been taken up and were an asset of the company. The back range, while important, was not considered, as it was waterless, depending on the North Fork to supply the cattle. In many ways the range was a duplicate of the one on the Beaver, with about the same carrying capacity for live stock. It was an advantage to show the cattle in small round-ups, and four were deemed sufficient. That the ranch had been recently worked by the general round-up was an advantage, as it left the home cattle almost clean of strays. The coming day's work would be a classifying, a stock-taking, an inventory, as a merchant might his wares.

The next morning found an outfit of fifteen men available. The retired foreman, his horse in a walk, directed the work with an ease and deftness which proved him no 'prentice. Patiently he awaited the sun on the cattle, and the day was well advanced when the first round-up had quieted down to admit of the work beginning.

The home men cut out all strays and sent them adrift, down to the clean ranch brand. One or more counts would be necessary, and on the main one, Sargent called Hamlet to his assistance. The cattle were slowly lined through between them, and held for a second count and classification. On the next one, every man from the Beaver was assigned a task, running from beeves to toddling calves, the extremes being covered respectively by the foreman and Dell Wells. On the intermediate grades Hamlet counted all steers, twos and threes, Downs the mixed yearlings, while Joel was assigned the cows and heifers. Counting the calves was a side issue for their own information, as a calf, while following its mother, was never counted in range dealing.

The first gathering of the day totaled a few over seventeen hundred head. Under a classification, the two counts differed less than forty in numbers.

'That's near enough,' said Sargent. 'That's right in line with the books. The brand will run about ten per cent she stuff.'

'And with this advantage,' added the ex-foreman: 'these cows are native to the Arickaree. All our original stock has passed away. Very few of our cows are adrift. You'll find them nearly all here on the home range.'

The second circle was finished before noon. Its numbers ran in excess of the first. As in the previous one, the beeves were missing.

'The books show three thousand double-wintered

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beeves,' observed Sargent, consulting a memorandum. 'Where are they?'

McWilliamssmiled and turned in his saddle. 'You may have noticed that cattle drifted last winter,' said he, with a sweep of his hand to the south. 'Some of these company beeves were caught out on the divide during the first storm, and they haven't come back. With nothing to check them, my guess would be that some of them are as far south as the Arkansas River. But, of course, that's pure guesswork. If I had a new spine and outfitted right, it wouldn't worry me to go and get them. They're somewhere.' His hand again swept the south.

'We met a good many rustlers this spring,' commented the Beaver foreman. 'Last winter's drift encouraged every one and his cousin to get busy. I'd hate to leave beeves adrift by the year.'

'Rustlers know where to rustle,' replied Mac. 'The way cattle men are organized now, getting away with cattle is no easy matter. And heavy beeves, ready for market, are nearly safe. Every association has its inspectors on the markets. This company's failure is not due to rustlers looting it.'

The last two round-ups of the day finished, a summary of the home cattle was possible. Over six hundred calves had run the gauntlet, the mixed yearlings falling short of that number, both representing ranch breeding.

The cows on the Arickaree were a decided improvement on the ones on the Beaver. They were all

native to the valley, possessing the homing instinct, while their offspring reflected care in their breeding. The total of the day's work, taken unexpectedly, confirmed the report furnished the commission firm, and only a few weeks afterward. The numbers had even overrun those reported to Major Hunt, and an intelligent line on the holdings to the company was available.

Joel and his foreman dropped to the rear of the returning cavalcade. 'As straws tell which way the wind blows,' remarked Sargent, 'this day's work gives us a clear line on these company cattle. In the first place, you can rely on it that the cattle were here, or those loans would never have been advanced. The money was furnished to buy young steers, just as you bought them to stock your ranch. It all came about by too much red tape and not enough cow-sense. Again, these ranch books were kept by some one who knows how to keep cattle accounts: the steers were carried forward yearly until they entered the beef class; the heifers were advanced until they classified as cows. The books haven't been tampered with. No one foresaw this assignment. As a third and last proof, to-day's work has overrun in every class where we had a right to expect them on the home range. The cows are here and the yearlings are here.'

Joel was aware that his years, in barter and trade, were unequal to coping with men. 'Sound McWilliams,' he urged. 'He's deep water. He knows more than he lets on he does.'

'Better keep him on the ranch,' suggested the foreman. 'If he never saddles another horse, he's worth two men. And in time he'll thaw out nicely.'

'By all means. Let him sit at the head of the table and give him a warm place by the fire.'

On nearing the ranch, the two overtook the others. Supper over, the volunteer help went their ways and the men relaxed. Sargent and the boys drew their chairs around McWilliams.

'I'm at liberty to tell you,' said the foreman, acting as spokesman, 'that this ranch has new owners. We have checked our figures over, and under the conditions on which we tallied out your holdings, possession will date from the first of this month. Things will run along the same, and, as you have been with the company since it began, you'll be a valuable man to the new owners. At least you must not think of quitting us, not until we get a firm grip on the reins. And not then, as long as you care to call this ranch your home. These other boys will come in handy, and a change of owners will affect no one on the ranch. The mill runs on, the miller only changes.'

A sigh escaped the old foreman, and there was something pathetic in his words. 'I've seen this coming for some time, and wondered if I would go down in the shipwreck. I'm of little use any more, but the new owners have my best wishes for success. I may be able to lend a hand, in the way of counsel

or suggestion, which would take a stranger time to acquire. A crust and a corner is all I'll need.'

'You can Injun around camp,' said Sargent, lifting the conversation to a lighter vein. 'Watch for the signal fires and keep an eye over the pony herd.'

'That's about my caliber,' smilingly said McWilliams. 'A ranch clerk — keep the accounts possibly.'

'Who kept these ranch books?' inquired Sargent.

'That was part of my work. Kept them largely for my own information. I couldn't tell head from tail about the office books, so I kept my own, good old Texas methods. Running through my accounts, things come to memory which I had forgotten years ago. A foreman ought to know to a hoof how many beeves the ranch will ship next fall. I could tell from my books and knew just where to lay my hands on the cattle. I can show a shipment in the fall of '83 that netted us seventy dollars a head. Oh, this was a ranch — once!'

The old foreman brought forward his accounts. He and the trio pored over them. The company had begun operations with a paid-up capital of fifty thousand dollars. Its first stock of cattle, numbering thirty-two hundred, was bought in Ogalalla. They were two-year-old steers, with a sprinkle of cows, trail cattle, and as McWilliams went into the steady growth of the ranch, amid the reminiscence of better days, his infirmities were forgotten.

'The Arickaree was a primal valley then,' said he; 'an old winter range of the buffalo. Our cattle grew

like summer weeds, and our double-wintered beeves waddled like ducks. We caught the big boom in cattle, with our sails winged out, and the future looked rosy. Then came the collapse of the boom, and our fall was as rapid as our rise. The final touches, leading up to to-day, are personal, and I don't care to mention them. I hope the new owners will turn the tide.'

'That's the job we've tackled,' laughed Sargent. 'One more question about these books of yours, Mac: your accounts show more cattle than the office books.'

The old foreman smiled. 'I never charge animals off the books, unless they die or are shipped. It's an easy way to charge them out of existence, but it proves nothing. You'll gather more cattle than the office books showed the company owned; you may gather nearly as many as my accounts call for.'

The difference in the accounts amounted to nearly nine hundred cattle, covering a period of ten years. The one had charged off a percentage for winter-kill, wolves, theft, death from natural causes, while the other made no such allowance.

'Let's take a little prowling around the ranch,' said Joel, rising, 'before it gets dark.'

Dell and the foreman joined him. 'You keep chickens here,' said the younger boy to McWilliams, at starting.

'That's my doing,' replied the old foreman. 'It helps out the table when we have company. It makes

things seem homelike to see a hen mother her chicks.'

The three strolled down to the Arickaree, and stretched themselves on the sod. 'Better leave me here,' suggested Sargent to the brothers. 'Left alone with McWilliams, I'll get the last detail out of him. He's still water, and to get close to one of these old-timers, you have to camp with him. Get him away from home, by a little camp-fire some night, that's when these quiet boys unfold and reveal their lives. Never ask one of them a direct question. Trust the facts to leak out.'

'Strange he never mentions how he was crippled,' pondered Dell. 'He admits it, and there it ends.'

'That's just like them,' commented the foreman. 'He's a solitary steer; runs by himself, like a muley cow. It's best not to ask how he was hurt. I'll sound the other boys.'

'The weak point in this ranch,' remarked the older boy, returning to the house, 'is the saddle stock. The remuda needs fortifying.'

'It needs thirty or forty more horses,' agreed Sargent.

'We can't spare them from the Beaver,' continued Joel. 'If we knew where to buy them——? Our account with the commission firm is still in black ink.'

'Don't waste any time, then, in changing your account into red ink and more horses,' urged the foreman. 'To gather the cattle adrift, I'll need a hundred horses, enough to mount fifteen men. I don't want to go short-handed, and there are a dozen of

these ranch horses that have seen their best days. Good enough to dub around home on, but unfit for three months' work.'

It was necessary to advise the commission firm, and on reaching the house, the question of railroad connection arose.

'We get our supplies to the north, on the Platte,' explained McWilliams. 'In shipping cattle, we have the choice of two roads. The one to the north has the best water for grazing beeves to the railroad, shipping to Omaha. The other one, to the south, is just as near, in case you want to ship to Kansas City. Gives you the choice of two markets.'

'Can you leave me on the railroad to-morrow?' inquired Joel, indicating to the south.

'Easily. Only sixty-five miles. Wild Horse is our down-country station.'

'I'll have to go in anyhow,' continued the boy to his foreman, 'and I might hear of some saddle horses for sale.'

'That's a meaty idea,' said the latter, with finality. 'Kill two birds with one stone.'

'We're going to leave Jack with you,' announced Joel to the ex-foreman. 'It will take some time to get the run of the ranch, but he can always advise with you. The rest of the boys will leave for home in the morning. You know the men of the country and can lend a hand in getting up a good beef-shipping outfit. That's our next work, and we'll begin it soon.'

'Mac will be foreman here,' said Sargent, 'and I'll

be the straw boss. I'll take out the wagon and do the coarse handwriting.'

An early start was agreed upon. One of the regular men would take Joel to Wild Horse, and at starting, the party held together for some distance. On halting a moment, at the parting of the ways, Dell inquired of their foreman if he had found out how McWilliams became crippled.

'No,' said Sargent, turning in his saddle to Joel's guide, 'do you know?'

'Yes,' admitted the latter, lowering his voice. 'Twenty-one years ago last fall he was making a hand with a beef herd, bound for Fort Sumner, New Mexico, when the Comanches attacked them. The outfit routed the Indians, but an arrow-head lodged in Mac's spine. The surgeons at Fort Sumner were afraid to remove it, and it's there yet. About two years ago it resulted in a stroke of paralysis.'

'The old boy's entitled to a warm corner,' thoughtfully remarked the foreman.

'See that he gets it,' urged Joel. 'I want him to have as much as any of the rest of us. And if he never turns another cow, let him want for nothing the ranch affords.'

'It strikes me as a good omen,' said Sargent, still meditating. 'Your ranch on the Beaver began as a hospital, and by keeping charity green in our hearts, it will never lose us anything.'

CHAPTER VIII

KEEPING THE POWDER DRY

'Is that Wild Horse?' inquired Joel, as the mirages lifted near evening and revealed distant objects in the valley of the Big Sandy.

'That's her,' replied his guide. 'We'll make it within an hour after sunset.'

With a brief respite at noon, the two had been in the saddle all day. The regular man had often been over the trail from the ranch to the station, with beeves, and knew every camp on the route. The different waters were pointed out, measuring the daily drives of beef cattle, and at one of these the horses were unsaddled for an hour and allowed to roll and graze.

'It takes us a week to make the round trip with beef,' said the guide during the noon halt. 'Ten days would be better; it would admit of grazing the beeves all the way down. It depends on the rush.'

No detail of the route was overlooked by Joel Wells. On reaching the station after dark, he visited the shipping pens, noted their capacity, made inquiry as to their approach, their length of wings, until he had a complete mental map of the cattle yards and their surroundings. Wild Horse was a duplicate of Grinnell, shipping station for the Beaver Ranch, bleak, sunburnt, and uninviting. A

night train stopped for water, and, taking his saddle on board, the young cowman continued on to his destination.

On reaching the city, a surprise awaited him. He had wired his coming, and the train arriving late in the day after office hours, he was met at the depot by Major Hunt and Mr. Stoddard. The latter took Joel to his hotel, and after the two had gone over the situation on the Arickaree, the old cowman breathed easier.

'You think it's an honest failure, then,' said Mr. Stoddard. 'You believe the cattle were there last fall.'

'I have every reason to think so,' replied Joel. 'The books on the ranch ——'

'The books may have been tampered with, may show cattle that never existed,' interrupted the old Texan.

'The accounts I'm speaking about were kept by the foreman for his own information,' insisted the boy. 'He's an old man, no longer foreman, a cripple, and if you met him you wouldn't question his accounts. It's as simple as a primer. He has been with the company ever since it began operations, and he's heartbroken over its failure. The office books mean nothing to us.'

'Just so you're satisfied. Remember there are tricks in all trades but ours. You boys must take no chances. If any one must lose, let it be the creditors.'

'Any chance we're taking is an inviting one. First,

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we're just home from the round-up. The drift was heavy. Again, we know that the strays of this company were left adrift; that it was poorly represented at the spring round-up. We know where the missing cattle are. Our boys saw them. And lastly, we have counted and classified the cattle on the Arickaree, and are satisfied that the assets, in sight, will pay every dollar of the indebtedness. That's all we ask.'

'Very well, then,' said the old cowman approvingly. 'Just so you feel safe. I'm willing to lose my share, but no one must saddle a dead horse on you boys.'

'We're not buying dead cattle. That range on the Arickaree is worth something to us. It's shipped seventy-dollar beeves in the past. It's a big chance. Our foreman is simply wild to gather the cattle adrift. And our classification shows that they are nearly all double-wintered beeves. Think of that. Ready money!'

'You're the doctor,' nodded Mr. Stoddard, with emphasis.

It developed that the latter, when advised of the pending sale to Wells Brothers, had come on to protect his own interests. He looked upon the brothers as his customers to whom he had extended a credit, and, in the absence of Manly, he felt that his presence might be of some advantage to the boys. To take over a ranch, the holdings of which were credited in excess of ten thousand cattle, was in no sense

a task for amateurs. The old cowman was justified in feeling a concern for his protégés.

'There is no occasion for alarm,' said Major Hunt to Mr. Stoddard the next morning at the office. 'Up to the beginning of last winter we have had a line on the company's holdings. Our solicitors have visited the range every summer for years. We controlled the sale of the purchased cattle two years ago; our men passed on them, saw them run into the ranch brands before starting for the home range. We were justified in advancing the funds to buy the cattle. Our clients will not lose a dollar. I'm banking on the boys setting the ranch on its feet.'

'It's no small undertaking,' protested the old Texan. 'I wouldn't touch it with sugar on it. And here these boys jump in and tackle a bankrupt cattle company.'

'Not blindly,' countered the Major. 'These boys and their foreman have gone over the assets, and now are willing to take the chance. They're not buying a pig in the woods. They know the situation better than we do. All we need to do is to stand behind them and they'll come out on top.'

'It looks like we'll have to,' admitted Mr Stoddard. 'Small choice, however. It's stand behind them or hold the sack.'

'Are you still willing to take over the affairs of this company on the terms and conditions given you last week?' inquired Major Hunt of Joel.

'Perfectly willing. In fact, anxious for the chance. I even left our foreman on the ranch.'

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The old factor laughed loudly. 'There's your answer,' said he to Mr. Stoddard. 'You long horn Texans never take a chance except on your cows calving. These boys have the Western spirit. They'll make cattle kings yet.'

Dudley Stoddard bowed to Major Hunt. There was a note of irony in his politeness. 'Command me,' said he, lifting his hat. 'No one has stood behind these boys longer or is more willing to go farther. They established their first credit with me, and have always protected it. Understand me clearly: I challenge any one to say they are unworthy of confidence.'

'That's the reason I want them to have this chance. They're workers. I know that the cattle are in existence, and that these boys can gather them. I'm willing to risk my eggs in their basket.'

'You're not talking to me. I'm years ahead of you. My cattle have been in their hands for some time past.'

Major Hunt beckoned Joel aside. 'I'll have all the necessary papers ready for you this afternoon,' said he. 'Now, is there anything else?'

'We could use anywhere from thirty to fifty saddle horses. Have you any idea where they might be bought?'

The old factor hesitated, and Mr. Stoddard turned back from a window. 'Horses?' said he, catching the boy's inquiry. 'You lack saddle stock?'

'The remuda on the Arickaree is the only weak

point in the outfit. It needs bracing up with more horses.'

'One by one the reasons of this failure crop out,' snorted the grizzled cowman. 'Strange your firm's solicitors, at the ranch yearly, didn't notice this weak link in the chain. Small wonder the cattle are adrift. Were they trying to run a ranch with one horse to the man, like cavalry?'

'The present remuda might answer for ordinary ranch needs,' said Joel. 'But we expect to send out an outfit to be gone three months. To gather in the cattle astray, we must mount our men.'

'Of course,' murmured Mr. Stoddard, meditating. 'Of course you must have more horses. In cattle work, men don't ride broomsticks like we did when we were little boys. You must mount your men. Horses? More horses? Certainly; you must keep the powder dry.'

'There's quite a drive of odds and ends at Trail City this season,' suggested Major Hunt.

'There you are,' agreed the old cowman.

'We prefer wintered ones,' urged Joel. 'At steady, hard work, these through horses haven't any more bottom than a sheep.'

'You'll find wintered ones at Trail City,' said the Texan. 'Every fall speculators buy up the remnants of saddle stock on trail markets, expecting to sell them to ranchmen in the spring. If I needed horses, I'd go to Trail City.'

'I'll go to-night,' said the eager boy, nodding to

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Mr. Stoddard; then, turning to the old factor, 'Give me a letter of credit for our balance and get me a pass. I have my saddle with me.'

'Make it two passes,' nodded the old cowman, 'and I'll go along. I have the time, and I like to travel with wealthy men.'

'Now you're talking sense,' said the old factor, bustling about; 'now we're getting into the collar. By all means, go along.' Turning to the boy, he continued: 'Don't hesitate to overdraw on your letter of credit. Mount your men and gather those beeves, and the expense will take care of itself.'

'Gathering the cattle adrift isn't worrying us a particle,' simply said Joel. 'The important thing is to cover every beef round-up this fall where a single animal might be astray. We may have to split the outfit up at times, ship in less than trainloads, and send home all the she stuff unfit for market. The idea is not to leave anything adrift for rustlers.'

'Do you think I picked the wrong outfit to set this defunct ranch on its feet?' politely inquired Major Hunt of his elderly client. 'Honest Injun, did I?'

'There's a world of difference between theory and practice,' retorted the old cowman. 'You and I are holding the sack, bogged to the saddle skirts, and we're hoping that these boys will throw us a rope and pull us out. I hope you're right. But your theory and my experience will never bring the cattle home. We'll have to send out young blood, real range men.'

The two old men sparred along in give-and-take repartee. The one was a practical cowman, somewhat provincial in his views, while the other, from a wider contact with men, took a more hopeful survey of the general outlook. Each filled a necessary niche in a common industry, while with them stood a boy, alert, ambitious, absorbing into his fiber every element which made and marked him apart in their respective callings. The apparent roughness of the Texan was fully understood by Joel Wells, as a rough exterior, in his experience, was the token of a generous nature.

'Who are you sending out with this independent wagon?' inquired the old cowman, addressing the boy.

'Our foreman on the Beaver. And I'm going with him. At the end of the shipping season, we'll know if we bought a lost mine. You may laugh at us then, or we may all laugh together. Anyhow, we're gladly taking the chance.'

'Good luck to you,' said the old ranchman, smiling his approval. 'Young blood will tell. Hitch your wagon to a star.'

Man and boy strolled out of the office. On their return, during the afternoon, everything was in readiness to complete the sale to the brothers. The letter of credit showed a healthy balance, sufficient for all needs, passes had been secured, and at the final parting, Joel said to the old factor:

'Suppose we are pushed for time, at the close of

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the beef harvest, could we ship our last consignment from the Arickaree to Omaha?’

‘Certainly. We have a branch office there. Take your choice.’

‘That’s all. It’s a question of saving time. We may have to take advantage of the shortest route to the railroad.’

The two caught an early train, and a day later arrived at Trail City. It was the same shanty town, half-deserted, canvas whipping in the breeze, and the windows missing from many houses. The most gratifying change was a matter of the moment, Mr. Stoddard swinging, on the general look, from one extreme to the other. Joel had seen a similar instance before, in the case of Don Lovell, the drover, almost ranting in holding his trail outfits up to a high tension of alertness.

‘You have to keep tapping them on the shoulder,’ explained the ranchman. ‘Let them know that some one is keeping tabs on them, otherwise they might fall asleep at the switch. Major Hunt is one of the most trusty men I ever knew; but I couldn’t let this chance pass unnoticed. His firm handles any surplus funds of mine, and I expect him to keep awake. A good man, but long on theory. Start the old Major out with a trail herd and he wouldn’t get through with the wagon and half the remuda. But he can sit in an office and figure it all out. I’m not uneasy but that you boys will come out on top. Now you know why I differed so with Major Hunt. I simply had to rowel him to keep his tension up.’

Mr. Stoddard was well known in Trail City. General inquiry was made for saddle stock, resulting in liberal offers of through horses, while several wintered bands were located. The latter were some distance away, both above and below the town, and short trips were necessary. Several days were wasted in looking over the available supply of horses, the wintered ones being priced at excessive figures, while the through ones were offered at reasonable prices.

Joel was worried. He wanted the wintered horses, but the price was prohibitive. The old Texan came to the rescue with a timely suggestion. 'Begin buying through ones,' said he. 'They'll do for night-herding. One of these unacclimated horses will stand a two hours' guard every night and keep strong. At least that's my experience on the trail. Use them in both your outfits this fall. The owners of these wintered ones will hardly let you get away.'

The suggestion was carried out. Ten horses were picked from one remuda and fifteen from another, a man was hired, a pack-saddle secured, and other preparations for leaving were in evidence. In the meantime the owners of the wintered horses hung around Mr. Stoddard, who made it a rule to have a pleasant word with each, but throwing a wet blanket over their hopes of selling any horses.

'There's no question but young Wells wants your saddle stock,' said he observantly, when the opportune moment had arrived. 'But when he can buy

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two through ones for the price of a wintered horse, there is no chance of you selling yours. He might allow you ten dollars difference, but I wouldn't. Anyhow, it's almost too late, as the young fellow will fill his needs to-day. We have the horses in sight, and he wants to start home in the morning. This is your last chance, and if you want me to, I'll talk to the boy.'

'It's shoot, Luke, or give up the gun,' said the old Texan to Joel, a few minutes later. 'Those speculators must come to us, or say they don't want your money. You'll get the wintered horses, or I'm a poor trader. Within an hour they'll come up and eat sugar out of your hand.'

His words proved the old man's aptness in barter and trade. The owners of the wintered horses reopened bargaining, and by easy stages closed a deal on thirty head.

'It isn't exactly stealing them,' ruefully said one of the sellers; 'not if we take the money.'

'Now, don't bleed to death on this boy's hands,' said Mr. Stoddard to the speculators; 'don't muss up things and give the coroner any trouble. You didn't exactly steal them last fall from some poor, homesick Texas drover, did you? I've had to sell horses at the end of a drive, or at the close of the season, and I've met your kind of folks. Your game is about over.'

Joel was inwardly gloating. He saw a remuda for the Arickaree, second to no ranch in the country.

Given an outfit of men, they could throw out a drag-net that would bring in any wandering cattle. The necessary horses were the only item lacking, and now they were his in abundance.

The two wintered bands were widely distant, but having looked them over together, the old cowman volunteered to select and accept in one direction while Joel went in the other. They returned the next day with the horses in hand, and hasty preparations were made for starting home. A second man was picked up, and, throwing all purchases together, the boy started, accompanied several miles by the old ranchman.

Aside from their present errand, the two had not overlooked the trail offerings of cattle. They were besought by drovers and agents, but until the beef harvest was over, nothing definite could be done. The drive of the year was light, badly mixed, running from straight brands of ranch stock to she stuff, and including a few herds of straight steers. Several of the latter were in the hands of assignees, while the former were the remnants of bankrupt cattle companies. It was plainly evident that the glory of the long trail had passed, not a herd having ventured north to Ogalalla or the Platte country.

'You'll find cattle here this fall,' said the old cowman, at parting. 'Better stock up to the limit of your ranges, for it's your last chance at trail herds. Come down into my country next winter, and get acquainted with the breeding ranges. If you

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are going to run a beef ranch, 'hereafter you'll have to ship in young stock.'

The grizzled ranchman and his protégé struck hands. 'I may come down,' said the latter. 'It all depends on the winter. I want to come down to the Pease River and see the country that bred our Lazy H beeves.'

The two turned away again and again, some suggestion recalling each other, as lovers linger at a gate.

'Now, is there anything further?' finally insisted Mr. Stoddard.

'Yes,' said Joel. 'Send us Manly. He's just the man to handle our outfit on the Beaver this fall. He knows the range and the run of the shipping. Send him on at once.'

'I'll wire him this afternoon,' nodded the Texan, reining away. 'Joe's had his little tear around home, and it's high time he was getting back in the saddle again. S'long.'

CHAPTER IX

FRONTIER DAYS

'THERE'S your horses,' said Joel to Sargent, a few days later, as the addition entered the corrals on the Arickaree. 'You asked for them, and there they are. Now, kick.'

'They're not all wintered ones,' observed the foreman at a glance. 'About half and half. How does that come?'

The boy dismounted and gave the reasons. 'We had to make a bluff and buy twenty-five through ones,' he concluded.

'We?' queried Sargent, his eye surveying the two strange lads.

'Don't give me any credit. I had Uncle Dudley with me. All credit is due him for not running our bank account into red ink. Mr. Stoddard's a safe man to travel with.'

'But these unacclimated horses, what are you going to do with them?' tensely inquired the foreman.

'One moment: We had to plot against the whites. You must admit that Uncle Dud is a cowman. He claims, for night-herding a through horse will stand a two hours' guard, night after night, for months on the trail. It's his suggestion that we use these unacclimated horses for night work. I'm going to take

twelve head of them down to the Beaver, and bring both your full mount and mine up here. That's what I call mounting an outfit. That will give you a remuda of fifty extra wintered horses. Now, bless your heart, kick!

'I have no kick coming,' said Sargent, bowing. 'That ties my hands. Give me my old mount and I'll work for nothing, live on land terrapin, and drink creek water. Are you going out with us?'

'Uncle Dudley promised me Manly, and he'll have charge of the Beaver outfit. Yes, I'm going out with you.'

'Good medicine. Come on, boys; let's put a rope on each of these new horses, thin out their tails and trim up their hoofs.'

Late that evening a courier reached the ranch with welcome news. Culbertson, at the forks of the Republican, had announced a celebration for the last three days of July.

'It's a tournament, a regular hog-killing time,' said the messenger. 'Lashings to eat, barbecued beef 'til school's out, and big doin's every night. Here's one of the bills.'

The foreman took the poster, read it carefully, and passed it on to Joel.

'You're from Addison's ranch, aren't you?' inquired Sargent. The lad nodded. 'Your outfit going?' queried the foreman.

'We aim to enter a man in every contest. Of course, if those Texans come down from Ogalalla —

well, they're good horsemen and throw a wicked rope. Still we'll give them a run for their white alley.'

'Ever hear of the Bar Y ranch on the Beaver?'

'No, but our ranch covered that range on the round-up last month. Quite a holding of cattle, so our boys said.'

'And some dick-nailing good horses. If I were back on that ranch, I'd try you Addison fellows once, just to feel you out and see how you ride and rope.'

'That's why Uncle Tim sent you the handbill; wants to get acquainted. He wants you to come down and bring your knittin'.'

'Thanks,' said Sargent, assuming the duties of host. 'You'll stay with us to-night. This is our cook. Speak to him and he'll look after your wants. Awful glad you dropped in. We're strangers on the Arickaree.'

The cook beckoned the guest to follow him, and the others pored over the notice of the coming barbecue. 'Read it, Mac,' urged one of the men.

'Good prizes,' admitted McWilliams. 'They offer a hundred-and-fifty dollar Cheyenne saddle to the best rider of bucking horses; the same to the man who ropes and ties a steer the quickest. And a San José saddle, of the same value, to the winner in a ten-mile relay race, using ten or more horses. Here's a new one: "One hundred dollars, in cash, to any one who rides the pet bull, with or without

a saddle." "Pioneer fiddlers' contest every night, &c., &c.""

'Mac, did you ever see a San José saddle?' inquired Joel.

'Owned one once. Made in California. Use a natural fork. It's mostly in the tree. Fancy leather work, too. Among Western saddles, the San José is a king-pin.'

'Say, fellows,' mused the foreman, 'that San José saddle would look well hanging on the gallery of this ranch house. Suppose we ask the old man for a week off, and drop down to Culbertson. What do you say, old son?'

'There's a cow outfit down on the Beaver that may have the same idea,' replied Joel; 'that this prize saddle would look well in their dug-out. Besides, they have the best horses.'

There was a challenge in the boy's remark. Sargent languidly looked about at his men. 'Hear that, boys?' he inquired. Turning to young Wells, he continued: 'I have your promise of my old mount on the Beaver and your string extra to fill out the Arickaree remuda. So far, so good. Deliver me those extra horses next week at Culbertson, and my gauntlet's on the ground, defying your other outfit to dust up and trot out its best men.'

'I think your bluff's called,' said the boy. 'Have you the time to spare?'

'Easily. It's a meaty idea to take the remuda and outfit out and swing around the circle, touch at

Culbertson, and bring home the prizes, including any loose cash. Is it a go?’

‘It’s a go. Bear in mind, I’m neutral. I would like to ride one of those new saddles, just once, on a Bar Y horse just the same as on an Arickaree one. Understand, I’m not particular which outfit wins. Just call it a week’s holiday, and ride purty.’

There was planning done that night. ‘So you Addison men are going to put on the big pot at the tournament, are you?’ questioned the foreman of the guest. ‘I may swing around that way and enter a few men myself.’

‘Come on, the more the merrier. No one seems to know this new Arickaree outfit. Still you may be there with both feet. The ones we fear most are those from Ogalalla, the two Plattes, and from Frenchman’s Fork of the Republican. Those boys up on the Middle Fork, when they feel well, can rope a little and ride a little. Some are Texans, and they sure throw a big loop. Fiddlers among them, too.’

‘I hear the voice of my own people,’ sighed Sargent. ‘From the very head of Frenchman’s Fork, where all the wild and woolly ones come from. Still, I’ve heard it thunder all day and never rain a drop. Don’t tell me any more about them or I’ll be scared witless. Barbecue and tournament, eh? Let me dream of my misspent youth.’

The next morning Joel started for the Beaver, down the Arickaree, accompanied by the courier,

and taking one of the new men and twelve horses. Owing to the severity of the previous winter, shipping would hardly begin before August; but there were men to secure for the coming beef harvest.

At noon on the third day, homing leisurely, men and horses reached the Beaver.

'We're going to Culbertson next week,' announced Dell, as if to forestall any orders to the contrary. 'Taking the wagon and remuda; big tournament on. I'm going to ride in the relay race.'

'Why not ride the pet bull?' suggested Joel.

'You know about it, then. Hear about the prizes?'

'Sargent's outfit expects to bring home that San José saddle. When it comes to mounting and dismounting, he has a horse wrangler who will make you sit up and take notice.'

'He lacks the horses.' The remark was authoritative, judicial.

An explanation was due; the Arickaree remuda was to be strengthened. 'The mounts of both Jack Sargent and myself are detailed to go to the upper ranch, delivered in advance of the Culbertson meet. That loses you fifteen horses. Sargent will have the best remuda in Colorado. And he's entitled to it.'

'Do I ride or walk during the beef-shipping season?' inquired Manly, who had arrived only the day before.

'You have your old string of horses, and here are a dozen picked ones for night-herding. I knew

you'd kick. Kick freely, Joe. I expected you to cloud up and thunder.'

'If you allowed that varmint, Jack Sargent ——'

'Jack says this Beaver outfit is going to have nothing to do, except to drift beeves down to the railroad. He's going out on the beef round-up; away down the Arkansaw below Dodge. I'm sorry, but Sargent don't speak very well of you. He says you don't deserve a good mount of horses. Says you'll ride any make of saddle; ride a cotton mule, and think you were mounted. But kick your head off. It's music to my ear.'

'We're not going to use either of those strings in the relay race,' whispered Dell to Manly. 'Let the Arickaree have them. Just a lot of fat dubs; horses that were never rode out of a walk. These new mounts are cracker-jacks. We're fixed for the beef season.'

Joel's sanction of the week off tempered all strife. His return was unexpected, while his approval was an open question. He also proclaimed his neutrality between the ranches.

'Jack Sargent threw his glove in the ring,' said he, 'and I took it up in your behalf. Now, it's up to you. There is no advantage in the horses. If any exists, it's in the men. This ought to be the best outfit. All I ask from either ranch is a flea-bit horse to potter around with. So look to your laurels.'

A programme was adopted. Bob Downs would

ride, while Reel Hamlet was selected to rope. Dell Wells was the lightest one, by twenty pounds, which was a decided advantage in a relay race. Since the first word reached the Beaver, Dell had been practicing mounting and dismounting, morning and evening, from a running bareback horse, and making the changes with wonderful rapidity.

'Where will they get the outlaw horses?' insisted Bob Downs. 'I never heard of one in Texas.'

Manly shook his head. 'Neither did I,' said he. 'We never raised one on the Pease River that we didn't break into a useful cow-horse on the Stoddard Ranch. A new lesson every day, it seems.'

'In this upper country,' volunteered Quinlin, 'there's lots of outlaws. They're horses that were half-broken once, and then abandoned. When a rope drops on them they snort like a deer. Nothing to them but bluff. Bob, you can ride one, if you can outwind him.'

'I'm not the lad that never was thrown,' modestly said Downs. 'In fact, no relation to him. Still, ah's honin' fo' Culbe'tson, an' that noo thaddle.'

'You'll get it — I don't think,' dissentingly said Manly.

The action of every horse on the Beaver was known. Dell had decided on a mount of fifteen horses, the pick of the ranch. Every one was anxious to turn over a horse or two from his string, that the boy might be in the race. Where any question of speed was involved, a test easily decided the matter.

'Manly thinks I ought to have a few horses, good for a mile dash,' Dell explained to his brother. 'In a pinch, I could send five of them a mile. There must be time lost in changing every half-mile. The fraction of a minute saved might win the saddle.'

'Figure it all out,' urged Joel. 'You have the boys here to help you. If you fall down or bungle the race, you're no brother of mine. If you win — well, I may want to borrow your Sunday saddle some fine day.'

An hour was set to leave for Culbertson. A boy from the settlement down the Beaver was secured to stay at headquarters.

Hamlet refused to practice. 'The first thing I ever learned was to throw a rope,' said he, in defense. 'Later I learned to swim and shoot, all equally easy. My first shot or my first cast of a rope is my best. All I care to know is the rules. Until then, I don't even know which horse I'll ride.'

The outing promised well. The wagon was taken along, well provisioned. With the exception of a few old horses, the entire remuda, bell mare, and colt accompanied the cavalcade.

The first night camp was made on the Republican. At a ranch on the latter river, it was learned that Addison's outfit had passed down the day before; the Reil and Hillerman, from above, were en route, and that a wagon from the Arickaree was coming.

'It's a new outfit,' said the woman, 'under a Texas foreman. No one seems to know them, except

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it's the folks who took over that busted cattle company. Lord, our boys have been gone three days. The men from Frenchman's Fork are laughing at everybody. Both my girls have gone. One of them is going to ride in a girls' race. It was pa's doing. Think of it!

Before the Beaver outfit got under way, Sargent rode into their camp. 'I don't mean no harm,' said he, pouring a cup of coffee. 'Not looking for any argument. Not bragging on my outfit. Just out on a little tear. You're all looking well.'

'Your horses are here,' said Manly acidly.

'Keep them, please, but keep your saddles on your own. I'll call for them the morning we start home. Nice country, the Republican.'

Joel suggested that they ride on ahead and select a camp. 'Just as soon as my outfit looms up,' agreed the foreman from the Arickaree. 'I don't want my boys to mix with these Beaver varmints. My outfit is particular who it associates with. We're modest folks, even if we don't care to neighbor with you Jayhawkers.'

Once the Arickaree wagon came up, half a dozen men rode for town, Manly among them. The latter and Sargent sparred along in scathing repartee, the bone of contention being the rearrangement of the saddle stock.

'We have the supreme court right with us,' asserted the man from Colorado. 'Have you never met Judge Joel Wells, jurisdiction over all this cow

country? I appealed my case to him and he decided that I was entitled to the best remuda. If you know of any court of higher resort, take your appeal to it. You can't talk me out of a single horse.'

'Court stands adjourned until fall,' announced Joel. 'I love to hear you fellows whine. You remind me of those trail foremen, driving for Don Lovell, nagging each other. Now, for the next few days, chew each other's manes freely. You're Texans, cousins more than likely.'

Near town, both sides of the main Republican were occupied by camps. Saddle horses, under herd, were in sight on every hand. There was no object in camping near town, and a camp was selected fully five miles out, it being the intention of camping the wagons together.

Leaving two men to pitch camp, the others rode for town. 'We have the details,' announced Sargent, on their return. 'Our outfits registered thirty-nine and forty. All entries must be in by noon tomorrow. Here are the rules governing the contests.'

'Twelve outfits from the North and South Platte here already,' added Manly. 'The town's full of lads from the Solomon and Smoky, boys that we met on the round-up this spring. Every one's dragging his rope. Oh, it's going to be some tournament!'

'Did you see the saddles, the prizes?' demanded Dell.

'Say, old pard,' answered the Arickaree foreman,

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'if my man can't win that San José saddle, I want my old bunkie, my old side-kick, to win it. It's worth riding for; an illustrated saddle with pictures on it. Honest, I wish my wrangler had your horses.'

The remudas were thrown together and put under night-herd. Neither of the outfits would compete the first day, due to late registration. This was a gain, as a pace would be set in the different contests.

Save for a lone man on day-herd, both outfits left for town. In common, they rode over the unfenced field. A rude grand-stand flanked the arena, a sand-bar the center, while a half-mile track was marked only by a furrow inside and a circle of fluttering flags outside. As befitting the epoch, the appointments were new and crude.

The entry numbers were in accordance with the registration. In the relay race, the Wells ranches, save one, came last, in a total of eighteen. In riding and roping both ranches would be called the second day.

The barbecue was a success; thousands were fed. The crowd was impatient for the programme to begin, which was announced for one o'clock. In advance of the hour, the grand-stand filled, while hundreds of horsemen took the field or rode leisurely about. Every one was there, all in gala spirits.

The marshal of the day announced the opening event as the riding of the pet bull, and calling for the first rider entered. A country boy led the animal back and forth before the impatient audi-

ence, stopping occasionally to dole out a lump of sugar, which was ravenously enjoyed by a rather small red bovine.

The rider swaggered forth, accompanied by a friend. The boy handed the halter to the first man up, and began scratching toro around the ears, until he closed his eyes in serene contentment. The rider lifted himself cautiously to a seat, and the boy ran. There was an awakening, an indistinct blur, and the rider was whipped off. The boy ran to the bull and gave him an apple.

'I claim another trial,' sputtered the defeated entry.

'You were thrown,' announced the marshal, who laughed until he shook like a fat woman. The audience howled with delight.

The next rider was from the North Platte. The rules permitted a saddle. One was adjusted. 'Bud, blindfold him a moment until I catch the stirrup,' requested the second man.

The boy obliged. The blur following looked like an immense top in a whirlwind. The rider landed safely in the sand. Toro merited and received a second apple.

'Give that rider another chance,' some one shouted.

'No, thanks,' good-naturedly answered the boy from the Platte, uncinching his saddle. 'I'm no hog. I know when I have enough.'

The marshal called an even half-dozen names,

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without a man answering. The red bovine had bluffed the field remaining for that afternoon, and was led away.

A race for cowmen, fifty years of age or over, followed. A field of five got away, a half-mile dash, and was won by a ranchman from the Solomon River, due to his superior horse. A Stetson hat was the prize.

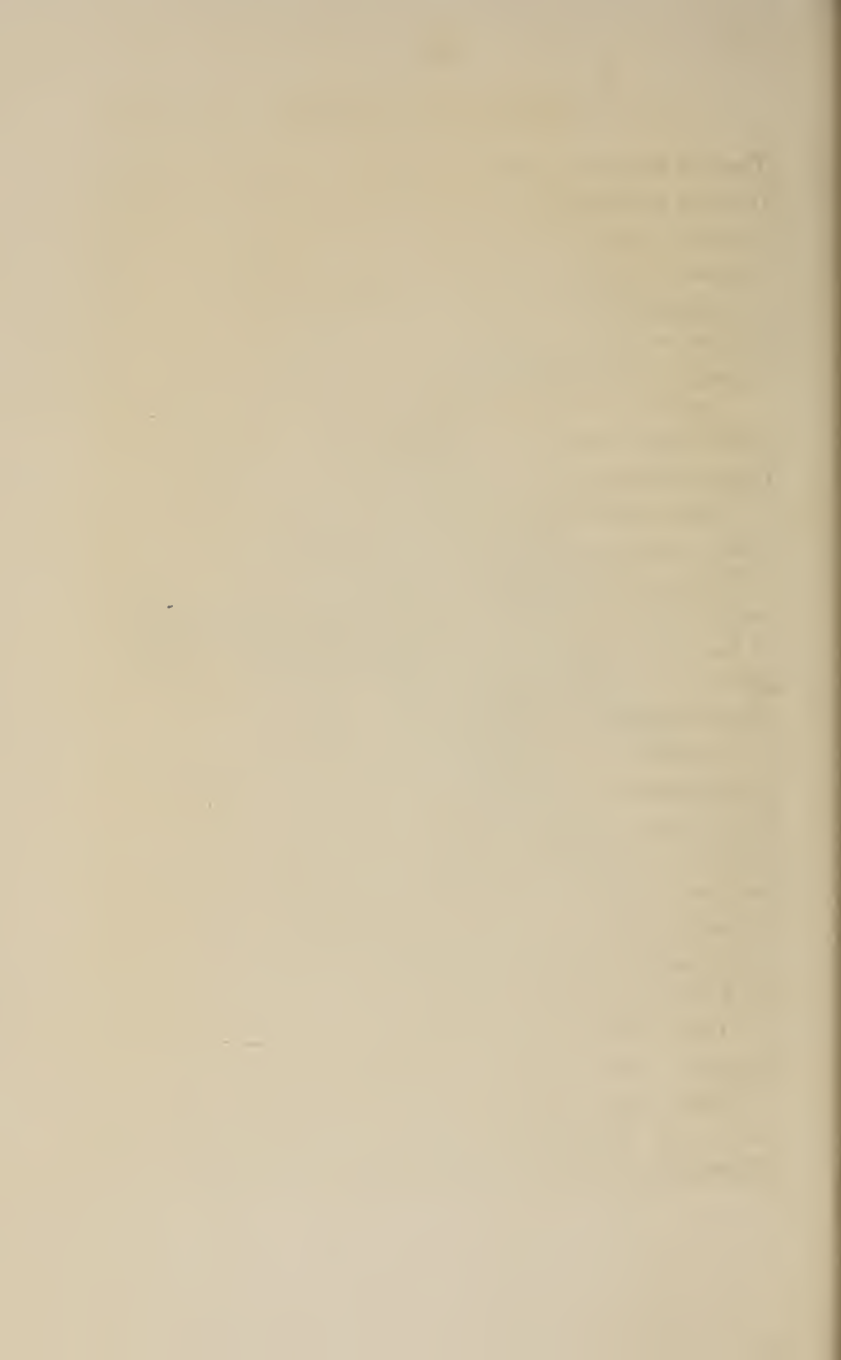
Roping and riding followed alternately. The arena teemed with action. A corral had been built to hold the cattle, which were freed singly through a chute. An animal was given a sixty-foot start. The roper must await the word of a judge to release his horse, and then ride to his task. There were ample mounted men to hedge the outer flank and stage the cast and tie in plain view on the chosen sand-bar. Any animal that escaped, or when freed, was absorbed into a herd at hand.

The first outlaw horse threw his man. The first roper's cast fell short, a faulty estimate of distance. The second caught a horn and the rope slipped. The second horse proved a false alarm, unworthy of entry. The third outlaw made up for every disappointment. All the old tricks came into play, and at the end of the struggle, both man and horse were bleeding at the nose. It was the best exhibition of the day. Seven contestants in all; forty-five seconds was the best time in roping and tying a steer. Current clatter said it would be lowered.

The relay race, with six entries, closed the day.



ALL THE OLD TRICKS CAME INTO PLAY



Two of the contestants lost their chance by horses bolting the course. The sun was setting when the last race ended. The fastest time was made by the Addison entry, a fraction under thirty minutes.

Around the camps that night speculation was rife for the morrow. The ranches of the brothers would appear in the arena.

'Suppose a rider draws a worthless mount,' protested Bob Downs, 'what show has he? Two short horses showed up to-day.'

'That's hard luck,' answered Sargent; 'that's all. They ride them as they come.'

With the exception of a herder and the two who were to rope, all were off early for town. The pick of two hundred horses was left to the men who were chosen to do the roping, and who reported in good time, leading their choice of mounts.

The clatter of the morning hours was typical of the occasion. 'If that old man from Frenchman's Fork had played "Hogs in the Corn," he'd 'a' walked off with first prize. But he plays "The Lost Indian," and there's a dozen men here who can play circles around him on that tune, can give him cards and spades in making a fiddle talk. Honest, who told him he could play?'

'That shows what little you know about good fiddlin'. Tobe, where were you raised?'

'Who owns the little bull?' some one repeated. 'Why, he belongs to a settler down on the main Republican,' some one replied. 'The children rode

him when he was a yearling, back and forth, to the grazing. The next summer he threwed them all. Now, no one can ride him. Talk about your action! Boys, that hundred dollars will not be called for. Not at this tournament. Say, I would love to own that red rascal.'

As on the day before, riding the pet bovine was the first number. The audience was restless; it mellowed the crowd to see a rider thrown. The marshal called the entries in order. Hisses and cat-calls greeted the name of every man who failed to respond.

The fifth man summoned stepped forth. 'Could he use a circingle?' he inquired.

'If it will help any, use two,' answered a judge. 'We want some lad to ride this red calf.'

The same boy, wearing a new hat and pockets bulging with goodies, humored his pet. The latter nosed his master, impatient for the reward, which he evidently scented.

A rope was fastened loosely around the animal's body. A din of greetings followed. 'Ride him, Tom!' and, 'Say, Tom, I aim to write your pa Sunday. Shall I tell him you rode the red steer? Any word you want sent your folks?'

Result, the same. The rider was thrown as a boy would snap water off his fingers. Strangers slapped each other on the back. Toro munched sweetmeats, careless of fame. Three others tried and failed.

The next card called for a girls' race. The starter's

flag was met by seven entries. It was the best race staged during the tourney. It was won by a nose; a blanket would have covered the heads of both horses. There was intense rivalry; every girl had hundreds of friends. The prize, a violin, fell to a little girl from the Smoky River.

In the riding, both the Beaver and Arickaree men drew blanks, spoiled horses. One ran backward, reared, and fell. The other sullenly crow-hopped a rod or two, and threw himself.

The roping was different. The pick of the ranches was under saddle. Hamlet made a perfect cast, threw his steer, tied him with a short rope, and lifted his hat to the judges. The animal had struggled in tying, and a few seconds were lost. Time announced, a fraction over thirty-two seconds. No loss of action. Snappy work.

Hughie St. John roped for Sargent's outfit. He had a better horse, foaled on the Arickaree, caught his steer on the margin of the sand-bar, a full rod nearer than Hamlet, his mount lent a perfect assistance, and a tie was made and a hat doffed. A hundred watches covered the incident. The judges consulted only a moment and announced the time: Twenty-seven seconds, flat!

The grand-stand arose, man, woman, and child. A thousand hats were waved in the air. If one before had ever been established on the Republican, that record was now lowered. No one doubted it. It was perfect teamwork of man and horse.

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Nothing now remained except the relay race on the last day. The roping record of St. John would stand, unless a better man on a better horse lowered it. The mark was high. Eight other entries were entitled to a trial.

Between the rival outfits of the brothers, camped together, interest became intense. The foremen sparred continually. Sargent, with one saddle as good as won, was riding a high horse, a feather in his hat.

'If my outfit really needed another saddle,' said he to Manly, 'I'd drift back to that tournament and bring home that San José leather. But what's the use? We're from the Arickaree, and just want to be neighborly. We just came down to get a meat-rind to grease the griddle, anyhow. Wasn't looking for much.'

'Really, what does he want?' inquired Manly, of Dell.

'He wants to pick five of my relay horses. Wants to brace up his string. He asks too much, even of a friend.'

The last day of the tourney was nearing its end. It had been an afternoon of thrills. Between the munching of apples and candy, the once pet of a settler's children rolled man after man, full five in number, on the sand. The riding was splendid, though no one even approached the roping of the previous day.

The relay race would end the meet. It was necessary to begin it before the other contests were over

in the main arena. The first man called was ruled off; he represented no known ranch, and nearly all his horses were unbranded. This was frontier sport, and hence clean. The race was typical of the pony express. It would be so kept. The second and third entries were contested with spirit. The fifth horse in Sargent's entry ruined the chance by bolting into the field, fouled on a rope, between a thrown steer and the pommel of a saddle, was thrown, scrambled to his feet, and ran away. The rider was unhurt.

Hope now centered in Dell Wells. Both outfits rallied to his support. The two foremen were brothers again. Joel even held a watch on the race.

The boy wore moccasins and rode hatless, his red hair glistening in the sun. The horses were stripped to the bridle. Dell led off with a mile dash. He transferred to a relay horse, and changed again at the half-mile. The watch showed no loss of time in relaying. The change from horse to horse was made with perfect rapidity. A firm clutch in a mount's mane, a running start, and they were off.

'Give us the time,' insisted Sargent, at the end of the fifth mile.

'Fourteen minutes, flat,' came the answer.

'Bring on a mile horse,' ordered the Arickaree foreman. 'Save the boy's wind. Tell the management to sack that San José saddle. We expect to take it to camp to-night. Hear the bells ring! Where's Tim Addison?'

'Right here, Jack. Where did you find the red-haired jockey?'

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'He's a cowhand; these are cow-horses!'

A horse, good for a mile, shot away. Addison's entry was the nearest. The race was narrowing to an end, with time to spare. The pace was again called at the end of the eighth mile. The margin was safe, barring accident.

'Ride right through, old son,' whispered Sargent to Dell. 'I can see you right now looking at your shadow in that new saddle. Ride purty, and it's yours.'

The ninth lap was made on a mile horse. The two best half-mile horses were saved for the finish. When the relay was made on the last half-mile, the crowd came to its feet, cheering lustily. Pandemonium reigned, as a horse shot away on the last lap. Opposite the grand-stand, the final score, horsemen ranked up ten deep. Each watch on the race realized the record of the tournament would be lowered. Time was on the safe side.

It was lowered. The judges announced the time as twenty-eight minutes and ten seconds!

Tim Addison fairly hugged Dell Wells. 'It's the horses!' he shouted. 'The Wells ranches have the horses!'

Only one more entry remained. Twenty minutes were used in the first five miles, when the owner of the horses conceded the race.

The first tourney on the Republican River was a marked success. It was an outpouring of a primitive day, a reflex of pastoral life, typical of a frontier

epoch. The last number on the programme was a triumphant march of the winners. A boy, leading a red bull, trimmed with black ribbons, led the procession. A lad from the North Platte, a young Texan, had deservingly won the riding contest. Hughie St. John, from the Arickaree, in Colorado, and Dell Wells, both wreathed in smiles, rode together. The minor contestants formed a happy group. Save for the night festivities, the tournament had ended.

CHAPTER X

THE HUNDREDTH SHEEP

ON the homeward trip the outfits held together only for a day. All were in high spirits, perfectly relaxed, and at every pool in the river groups disported themselves by swimming.

'You are not going home with us?' questioned Sargent, of Joel, at the parting of the ways.

'Not to-day. This Beaver outfit is liable to quit the reservation, without notice, and I'd better nurse them in home.'

During the first week in August, Joel returned to the Arickaree, to find the foreman in waiting. News had come up from the Arkansas Valley that shipping would begin by the middle of the current month, and the outfit expected to take the field ten days in advance of the work beginning. McWilliams and a boy were left at headquarters on the Arickaree.

'We'll drop down to the Arkansas as straight as a crow flies,' announced Sargent, on Joel's arrival. 'I want to skirmish along the Big Sandy as we go. Mac thinks we might catch a right smart drift down it and around its mouth. He has given me an outline where to look and the limits of any possible drift.'

'Our neighbors on the Smoky River will bring home everything on all outside round-ups,' said the

boy. 'I saw quite a lot of them at Culbertson, and when we work that range, we'll catch the bulk of any cattle on its headwaters. From all reports, we ought to pick up a good shipment along the Smoky.'

The Arickaree outfit left within a week. One man was detailed to assist the horse wrangler, another acted as wagon boss to the cook, leaving eleven men to scout the country outbound. The commissary was stocked for a month. Rolls of blankets and personal effects filled every niche of the wagon, the motive power of which was furnished by four mules.

'Well,' said the acting foreman to the ex-foreman, at parting, 'our work will be governed largely by your many suggestions. We'll look into all those pockets, those creek and river bends, that have caught your winter drift in other years. If they're not there, we'll throw the drag-net a little wider. And when this outfit comes home, if we haven't gathered your strays, why, fire us all. In the meantime, move your chair with the shade of the house and entertain any company that comes along.'

The outbound trip was of little interest. The outfit touched at Wild Horse on the railroad, crossed the Big Sandy, holding a true course to the Arkansas Valley. Big Sandy is a tributary to the Arkansas River, and by inquiry and scouting the missing cattle were met on the former, but not in numbers.

'It's all right,' said Sargent. 'Mac didn't expect us to see or hear of a hoof as far west as Wild Horse on the Big Sandy. The drift went southeast

from the Arickaree; we're traveling due south. We're safely outside the cattle astray.'

The outfit reached the Arkansas River on schedule time. A camp was made, between ranches, which were visited, with general inquiry for the brands in quest. Any disappointment was of a gratifying nature; no sign of the cattle was accepted as good news — that they were still outside the limits of the drift. An animal astray, in the summer, would attract more attention, arouse more inquiry among range-riders, than the ninety-and-nine that grazed on the home range. It was the stray that excited curiosity, and hence was sure to be noted.

The first round-up attended was fruitless. 'Move camp,' was the order of the foreman. 'We're fifty miles too high up the river. We'll make a day's move and scout the country as we go. We can check our inquiry by riding through the cattle. Any hoof adrift, this far from home, is a heavy beef. Hereafter, every one rides alone.'

Camp was moved. Every man on scout brought in the news of having sighted the missing cattle, and all ranches adjacent were visited. Reports were confirmed, and with pastoral hospitality a willing hand was extended. In the valley, the first shipments of beef were pending, and, tendering the services of his outfit, Sargent awaited the opening of the range harvest. †

There was little delay. Round-ups began thick and fast. The outfit was frequently divided, on one

occasion into three divisions, the wagon moving down the river and grazing under herd all cattle gathered. Ranches only carrying she stock tendered round-ups to the visitors, and the steady march, with increasing numbers, followed the river. At the end of a week, enough strays had been gathered to suggest a shipment.

'There's no hurry,' said the foreman to Joel. 'These strays under herd are faring like fatted calves, and from what I can hear in advance, we're due to make a haul around the mouth of the Big Sandy. And the old quarantine lines above Trail City are again reported in force, and we can't cross it with our drag cattle. We'll work on down to the quarantine grounds in Colorado, and then turn back up the Big Sandy. We'll take no chances on Texas fever.'

Sargent's suggestion was adopted. Above and below the junction of the Big Sandy with the Arkansas River, the drag-net caught over three hundred of the missing cattle. Another day's work and the isolated line would be reached.

'Order your cars,' said the foreman. 'Allowing for to-morrow's work, you'll have a full train. It may run twenty-five cars. So far, two thirds of the cattle gathered are fit for market. Old Mac surely has cow-sense; puts his finger on the cattle adrift every time.'

The train was ordered safely in advance. The last day's work cleared the Arkansas Valley above the

quarantine grounds, yielding its quota of strays, which were brought up to the wagon, preparatory to shipping out. The work had covered ten days; nearly seven hundred cattle had been gathered, a large majority of which would ship out as marketable beeves.

'There,' said Sargent to the boy, as the first train of beef left for market, 'there goes your first shipment of Arickaree cattle, twenty-two cars of twenty-two head each, and over two hundred of a drag-end left. And not over one fourth of the possible range covered where any drift might be expected. Are we going to gather the missing cattle? Check!'

'At the end of the beef season,' said Joel, 'I'll check with you. I'm feeling a trifle better already, and if we gather the cattle, I'll hit the ground with my hat and shout with you.'

The outfit turned up the river, carrying the drag-end of the mixed cattle, expecting next to work the Big Sandy. The summer had been favorable, water was plentiful, even filling the lakes and lagoons. The time passed rapidly, and near the end of the second week the outfit found itself encamped opposite Kit Carson on the railroad. A permanent camp was established on the Big Sandy, and, after covering the round-ups above, a second shipment became necessary. In beeves, its numbers fell short of the previous one, but with a remnant that was gratifying.

Some disposition must be made of the latter, now

numbering over four hundred head. Sargent drew a map on the sand. 'Here we are,' said he, 'shipping to-morrow from Kit Carson. The Big Sandy and the Arkansaw Valley are burnt bridges. Here's the home ranch on the Arickaree, and this is our chance to send home this mixed stuff. From here, we'll cross into Kansas, and the detail that takes home the drag-end can rejoin us on the headwaters of the Smoky. Round up the cattle and we'll start the remnant for home after dinner.'

The foreman was a worker. The numbers in his outfit admitted of a detail for any purpose, and, selecting four men, they started northward with all cattle unfit for market. Under a forced march, they would be out only two nights, and, taking a pack-horse, the mixed stuff left for the Arickaree, leaving a shipment of twenty cars for the next day.

As before, the commission firm was advised by wire of the pending shipment. Market conditions might delay it, but with consent for immediate shipment came the summons for Joel to accompany it.

'That's all right,' said Sargent. 'Something's turned up. Major Hunt's awake, has his ear to the ground. You can rest easy he isn't calling you in without a purpose. Take your saddle along and come back to Grinnell, and you'll find me on the headwaters of the Smoky.'

'How easy!' replied the boy. 'If I don't find you in the corral, you're sure to be in the stable. You speak of the headwaters of the Smoky as if it were some man's milk pen.'

'Strike the Smoky and come up the river,' explained the foreman. 'We expect to let the folks on that stream know what we come for, and wherever you hear of work going on, you'll find our wagon camped. We'll burn a lantern on the end of the wagon-tongue, and night or day, you can find us.'

An incident occurred in penning the beeves which brought to the fore Sargent's deep insight into cattle. A number of cows adrift had been gathered, and, having sent them home the day before, he noticed the heavy beeves were nervous, lowing without occasion, which was easily explained by the absence of all cows. He cautioned the outfit to observe extra quietness, and, as the beeves were entering the wings of the shipping pens, the exhaust of an engine, half a mile distant, fell upon the ears of over four hundred head. Acting under the herd instinct, every beef turned in his tracks, excited and impatient to break for safety. But the cordon of horsemen held them, the herd songs arose, the men relaxed and the heavy beeves were allowed to graze away as if their attempted stampede was unnoticed.

'Let the herd drop back a mile,' ordered the foreman, 'and then turn them for the chute again. Some one ask the station agent to move that engine out of hearing, and I'll skirmish around and see if I can borrow a cow.'

A number of the latter were on picket, the family cows of some villager, and the loan of one was easily obtained. Sargent led her out, met the beeves re-

turning, allowed the cow to graze forward in the lead, her presence, in the action of the cattle, being noticeable at once. No magic was employed, but confidence in an old cow, led by a horseman at the end of a picket rope, lured a train of beeves through the wings, past the portals, until the gates closed at their rear.

‘Wouldn’t that knock you off the Christmas tree!’ said one of the outfit to his chum. ‘Those fool steers must believe in a cow.’

‘It didn’t worry our foreman much,’ came the reply. ‘We didn’t lose over an hour on account of that little bobble.’

Sargent rode out of the corrals, talking to the cow. ‘Come on, little girl,’ said he cooingly. ‘I wish I had a sweet apple for you. Any time you and I can flim-flam a bunch of beeves, I’ll eat my hat. One of you boys take old Spot around to that tent, behind the section house, and give this dollar to the little woman who loaned us her cow. She’ll show you where to picket her again, bless her little fat heart!’

CHAPTER XI

SEEDTIME AND HARVEST

THE beeves reached the market the next day. The previous consignment had proved a surprise, in quality and weights, to the commission firm, the members and salesmen of which were impatiently awaiting the arrival of the second shipment. A regular shipper, assisted by Joel, had brought the train of beef through, and while unloading even Major Hunt put in an appearance.

‘How do you account for it?’ was the latter’s greeting to the boy. ‘Their condition, I mean,’ he added, as the owner hesitated.

‘The beeves?’ queried Joel, alarmed. ‘We thought they were prime cattle. ‘Everybody said they were the fattest ——’

‘Of course they are,’ interrupted the old factor. ‘We sent your first consignment to Chicago — too good for this market. They netted you a handsome profit over any offer here. If these come up to the same standard, we won’t even price these on this market. Is it the season?’

‘That’s one of the reasons,’ replied the boy. ‘Cowmen in the Arkansaw Valley told us that the tallow weed appeared again this spring; it comes about once in ten years in that sandy country. It gives the

cattle an early start in the spring, and is more nutrient than washy, wild grass. Again, these beeves were adrift last winter, which brought them through strong; a new range every week. Again, they haven't been handled in a year. They weren't even disturbed during the spring round-up.'

'There you have it,' said a salesman, nodding to the old factor. 'These beeves have enjoyed a year's perfect freedom, and favored with a good season, little wonder they are in prime condition.'

'Look this shipment over carefully,' said Major Hunt to the salesman, 'and if they are as good as the last, we'll run them to Chicago. Let the office know promptly. Come on, Joel.'

'Wait until I get my saddle,' replied the youth.

The old factor led the way. Once the seclusion of his private office was reached, the elder man threw off all restraint when he and Joel indulged in a friendly chat. Mr. Stoddard had never relaxed in reminding the senior member of the firm of his laxity in extending credits, and the latter hung on the boy's every word. 'Now you feel that you are going to gather the cattle adrift,' he finally remarked.

'So far we have covered only the range in Colorado, where any drift might have lodged. You have the numbers of the beeves shipped, and the other day we sent home over four hundred head of mixed stuff. We feel sure of a good shipment of beef from the Smoky, because we saw them during the spring work. We'll gather cattle on the Saline and Wal-

nut, and then come up the Arkansaw to the quarantine grounds. That circle covers the country, and we have left orders to ship any odds and ends overlooked or on the outside. It's a little too soon to shout, but if there's only twenty-five hundred head of cattle missing from the Arickaree, we have gathered over half that number already.'

'You'll gather more than that number,' said the old man, tapping the table with his finger. 'There's some system to your work. The company have been charging off its books cattle that might have been gathered. You boys will bring them home.'

'That's what McWilliams, the old foreman for the company, says,' admitted Joel. 'Accounts which he kept shows more cattle than the office books. Besides, we picked up any number of beeves that must have been astray two or three years, six-and-seven-year-olds.'

Major Hunt sprang to his feet and paced the room. 'Wait until I see Dudley Stoddard again! He's been abusing me like a dog. Claims that I've been lending money on tampered books; that we haven't a man in our employ who could invoice a ranch. Just wait until I get him in this office!'

The boy inwardly smiled, but said nothing. There was a distinct pause, when the younger one inquired if the Beaver Ranch had sent in any cattle, adding, 'You see, I've been out with the Arickaree wagon for over a month.'

'A thousand pardons,' humbly said the old factor.

'I've been so worried about the affairs of our clients. Yes, we've had two trains from the Beaver. Prime cattle, commanded the best price on the market. The third train will be in Saturday. The boys won't come in; they won't write. Just sulk around until you ask for more beef, it seems. They won't notice me. Suppose you order them to come in with Saturday's shipment. That foreman of yours, Joe —— ? Joe —— ?'

'Manly,' said Joel, assisting the Major's memory.

'Stoddard's man. Do you understand him?'

'He's been a trusty for Uncle Dudley a good many years now. We borrowed him only for the beef-shipping season. He knows the run of the ranch and the lay of things, and he don't want to come in with every consignment of beef. I'll wire the boys to leave me a horse and come in with the next shipment.'

The sale sheets from the Beaver shipments opened Joel's eyes. 'The first were double-wintered beeves,' explained Major Hunt. 'The second were single-wintered. Note the difference in price and average value.'

'The totals,' mused the boy. 'Lend me your pencil. Our balance ought to take up the Stoddard contract.'

'It was paid the first of September. Mr. Stoddard has advice to that effect. Also note that beeves are netting four to seven dollars more to-day than last year. Ah, my boy, you made a timely buy of that Arickaree ranch and cattle.'

Joel was absorbed in the totals. 'Nine hundred and forty beeves,' said he, meditating — 'more than squared the Beaver Ranch, leaving the other shipments clear velvet. And we're bound to ship a thousand or twelve hundred more, and a train of strays. The Beaver will go onto a pay basis this fall, with a healthy balance to its credit.'

'That's the idea. Let the Arickaree Ranch also pay for itself. Give it a good management, as you have the Beaver, and let it work out its own payment. You boys are getting a field experience of value. This is no time to hedge. Those sale sheets show that beef on foot is advancing. Cattle have been in the ditch since the boom of '84, but a turn for the better has arrived. Catch the advancing wave and ride it to success. Now it affects beef; in a year or two it will extend back to stock cattle, to a cow and calf.'

The boy again confessed his dread of debt.

'That idea has hampered more cowmen than honest debts ever hurt,' asserted the old factor. 'Didn't your contracts with Mr. Stoddard prove profitable?'

'They made a snug fortune, and we never had a dollar of our own at stake. We worked out our interest, and were well paid.'

'Can't you put another ranch on a pay basis like the one on the Beaver?' urged Major Hunt. 'I have another bargain for you,' kindly added the old man.

'Where?' eagerly inquired Joel.

'At Trail City. A herd of two-year-old steers, in a single ranch brand, the Tin Cup, run full thirty-three hundred head. The cattle are in the hands of an assignee, and we have been appealed to to find a buyer.'

'How long has the herd been at Trail City?'

'Since early in June is our advice.'

'Uncle Dudley and I must have driven through them, in July, while buying horses. A Tin Cup herd of twos?'

'That's the brand. Panhandle cattle, from the Tin Cup Ranch. I have nothing further to say; you must have seen them.'

The two dropped into opposite seats at a table. Prices were submitted and every detail gone over. 'The assignee is here,' added Major Hunt. 'I asked him to wait over. It takes ready money, but if you have twelve hundred beeves to ship yet ——'

'We need that herd,' admitted Joel; 'want it to restock the Beaver Ranch. Would it be safe to wait until Saturday's shipment is sold?'

'There is no time like the present. Your sale sheets show what your Beaver cattle are bringing. Tin Cup twos sell on their reputation. I wouldn't wait an hour.'

'Close the trade,' said the boy, with decision. 'Name on or before October 10th as the receiving date. Make an earnest payment, and stipulate that the cattle are to be held under loose herd, on the quarantine grounds at Trail City, where delivery

will take place. For the next month our outfits are going to be bogged to the saddle skirts in gathering cattle and shipping beef. If frost falls and lifts quarantine, we'll receive the herd earlier or the seller can deliver on the Beaver. If you can close on those conditions, it's a sale.'

'Send your wire and drop in this afternoon,' said the old factor, putting on his hat. 'I'll have a talk with the assignee. You may consider the deal as good as closed. The assignment is in behalf of a bank, and some uneasiness is being felt of having to winter the cattle in this upper country. That scares a Texan, but you boys aren't afraid of a little snow. Hang around, and I'll look up my man.'

The office sent the message, and Joel sauntered back to the yards. One of the firm's salesmen found the boy on the fence, overlooking the shipment from Kit Carson.

'We're not offering them,' explained the salesman, riding up. 'They go to Chicago to-night. There's good money in running fat cattle to Eastern markets.'

'The shrinkage?' questioned the boy. 'Won't they shrink more than enough to offset any gain in price?'

'They have done their shrinking already,' argued the salesman. 'You and I have no idea how these cattle kill and dress. That's a packer's secret. When buyers for these packing plants quarrel and bid against each other, we know that the cattle are

prime. Shrink? Why, these beeves will ship like that many cakes of tallow!’

Seller and buyer of the Tin Cup herd were brought together. Joel was weathered brown as an Indian, while the assignee, a flaccid-featured little man, was gloved and carried a cane. The contrast between the two, in years, occupation, the promise of life, was marked as clearly as day and night. Major Hunt acted as intermediary, alert in the interest of his young client, yet fair and open to all.

‘Now that we have agreed on the price,’ said the old factor, ‘the earnest payment in our hands, a neutral party, nothing remains but the expense of holding the herd another month or so. Surely we ought to agree on such a trifle.’

The assignee contended that any expense should be shared equally. ‘I’ll show you how to cut it in half,’ said Joel, ‘if that will suit you.’

‘I’m not a practical cowman,’ admitted the other, ‘but we have a foreman in charge of the herd who is so considered.’

‘Exactly,’ agreed the boy. ‘I met him. That’s my impression of your foreman. But here: he can drop back to the south side of the river and loose-herd those cattle with half his present outfit. That cuts your expense in half, no night-herding, and it gives the cattle every advantage of range. I’m willing to receive the herd twenty miles south of the river. And if your foreman says my suggestion is not practical, now that the cattle are as good as sold, I’ll stand all the expense. There you are.’

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'There you are,' repeated Major Hunt. 'What this boy lacks in years he makes up in experience. He and your foreman won't differ a word on the cheapest way to hold your cattle until quarantine lifts. That disposes of all contention.'

Joel went into detail, in explaining to the banker the advantage in loose-herding over close-herding cattle. 'Write your foreman to drop back to the open country and hold his herd as cheaply as possible, and he'll understand what I'm advising you to do. I could hold them for half your present expense, and so can he.'

The sale was made. An agreement was entered into and the assignee left that night for Trail City.

Inspector Vance, who had been detailed to cover the Kansas City yards, was easily located, and reported having found some twenty head of Arickaree beeves among the Western shipments to date. The two spent the evening together, and the next day rode the yards, scanning every Western consignment for possible strays. Near midnight they met the arrival of the Beaver shipment.

'Why didn't you fellows come in when Major Hunt wired you?' asked Joel of Manly and Dell. 'The old Major felt hurt.'

'Oh, he just wanted to pat us on the back and tell us what bully fellows we are,' languidly answered Manly. 'That kind of candy don't cure collar galls. We've been in the saddle, night and day, getting out these three shipments, and we don't want any sweet

stuff. When the beef shipping's over, we'll come in and put our little feet on the office furniture until he remembers a previous engagement. Right now, I'd rather sleep a few lines than make medicine with General Grant.'

It was harvest time on the range and the work called for men. Each in his own niche, one to his office and a hundred in the saddle, made up the rank and file of those who relied on the cattle for a livelihood.

In spite of their late hours, the range men were in the yards at early sunrise. The beeves had enjoyed a good rest, were rising and refreshing themselves, and would be ready to offer with the opening of business. Beeves from the Beaver had established a reputation on the block, packers knew to a fraction how the cattle from different sections dressed, and their buyers looked the offerings of the market over at an early hour.

The Beaver shipment was unsold at eleven o'clock. The brothers and Manly were loitering in the general office when the firm's cattle salesman entered.

'Have you sold them?' inquired Joel.

'Not yet. Every packer in the city wants them, and they'll have to come and see me. I sent my horse to the stable and I'll wait here until twelve. Your cattle will sell themselves.'

Joel was uneasy, as he must make a large earnest payment that day on the Tin Cup herd. 'Phones rang with the business of the day, and shortly a

buyer entered and inquired for the cattle salesman.

'Why don't you try and sell me those twenty-four cars of beeves?' inquired the former, with a shrug, when the salesman appeared.

'Don't wait,' replied the latter. 'You'll miss your lunch. The Burlington wants them for Chicago. Offers us a passenger schedule. If these hucksters don't want that train of beef, we'll chance them on Monday's market in Chicago. Prime beef isn't wanted here; old cows about fill the bill.'

As the salesman turned to leave, the buyer detained him. 'Don't you want to sell me your cattle?' insisted the latter. 'You ain't trying to sell them.'

'You have my price, and you can see how worried I am about selling that train of beeves.'

At this juncture a second buyer entered, instantly speaking to the cattle salesman, and ignoring the presence of every other person in the room. 'I want to see you a moment, Louie,' said he, sweeping through and entering a farther department, followed by the salesman.

The first buyer was dazed at the action of the other, but sprang to and knocked on the closed door. 'I'll take that train of beeves,' he shouted, rapping loudly. 'I've bought your cattle. Every one here is witness that I've bought them,' said he, turning to those present.

'Don't make so much noise, Simon,' said the hog salesman of the firm, checking over his morning's sales. 'It takes two to make a bargain, and you hang

fire too long to make a good beef buyer. You ought to know prime cattle at a glance. You'd make a better man for a soap factory, haggling over dead hogs and lump-jawed steers.'

The second buyer and the salesman reëntered the room. 'Come on, boys,' said the latter, 'we're going to weigh up the beeves. They cross the scales at noon.'

'I bought those cattle,' protested the first buyer.

'Take a walk through the hog yards,' suggested the salesman; 'take the air. You're a dead one. Life's too short to waste a single minute on you. Simon, you're too slow on the trigger to hunt buffalo. It takes a quick, sure shot.'

The brothers were being thrown in contact with the men of the cattle markets. The latter calling, the clash of buyer and seller, required men who could feel the pulse of a market, knew when to stand firm and when to make concessions. To buy or sell early, subject to the rise or fall of distant markets, required a rare touch of judgment that was in no way akin to mere barter. The boys were catching the financial lessons necessary to their occupation, and the wider the contact the surer was their equipment for the battle of life.

Every one would leave for home that evening. The affairs of the brothers were well in hand for the present, and at the parting moment the old factor inquired, 'Now, is there anything further?'

'Not for another month,' answered Joel. 'By that

time we will know where we are coming out on the Arickaree Ranch. Its beef will run better than the Beaver, all double-wintered or native cattle. Once we see the end of the beef run, we may want to make some arrangement to restock the upper range. Both are fine beef ranches, and ought to be restocked to their carrying capacity.'

'We'll keep that in mind,' noted Major Hunt. 'Oh, you must restock your ranges. And now, since we have placed the Tin Cup herd, others at Trail City may appeal to us. Get your beef marketed first, and then we can take up these other matters. If your cattle are finished, ship without orders, ship blindly.'

The Beaver men were entitled to return passage on the shipping contract, and early evening found the trio en route for Grinnell.

'Now that the cares of the day are over,' observed Manly, 'has any one the slightest idea why Dell and I came in with these last cattle? Major Hunt had nothing to say, and I'm sure both of us would have enjoyed ourselves better in the shade of the wagon.'

'I wanted to see you myself,' said the other boy; 'wanted to see your honest face and if you were working yourself ragged. All you're out is a little sleep, and you can make that up next winter.'

'You can't see me to-night,' answered Manly. 'Here's where I coil up on these cushions and sleep the sleep of the innocent. If the train runs off the track, don't wake me. I'm asleep now.'

└ The brothers talked far into the night. They were

fighting to win a foothold in their occupation; if the Arickaree Ranch could be placed on a pay basis, which was then in solution, all would be well.

The home station was reached the next morning. 'Did you leave me a horse?' inquired Joel, as they alighted from the train.

'Yes,' answered Dell; 'one of those you bought at Trail City last fall. He hasn't a lick of cow-sense, but he's a good road horse. The wrangler couldn't rustle in the remuda on him.'

Little time was lost when the trio mounted to ride their respective ways. 'Clean up the Beaver on your next shipment, including the strays,' said the older boy. 'Send a courier down to the Smoky a day or two in advance, as we may want to compare notes. We may have a remnant of cattle to send home, and I can't tell now what your next work will be. You may have to go to the Arickaree. Until I see you again, be good.'

'Is he hinting that we ain't always good?' inquired Manly of Dell, in grievous tones. 'The idea!'

CHAPTER XII

MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE

THE Arab's love for his horse is easily understood by the men of the open. The wild, waste places in the merciless deserts of the Orient find a counterpart in the dead, dull, immutable plains of the West. Scourged by every wind, sunbaked into dust, the heat-waves of which arise in mirages, symbols of the lake of fire, both are dreaded by Bedouin tribes and range-men alike. In wresting a livelihood from the waste places, none of earth's creatures come quite so near as the horse. As a comrade, weathering the sand-storms or mirages with an instinct that defies the night and scents the living water, the horse comes first.

'They say that you're an outcast,' said Joel, stroking the neck of his mount, 'and not useful around a cow-camp. But from the black stripe down your back and the rings around your legs, you must be a son of the plains. Now, just take me to the wagon and I'll call you mine and braid an eagle's feather in your mane.'

Somewhere to the southwest, and fully a hundred miles distant, lay a vague and indefinite country known as the headwaters of the Smoky River. In its brakes and dips, thankful if a lone tree was the only landmark, an outfit of men were combing its hills

and vales in search of their cattle. Though absent, the dominating spirit in the work was a boy of nineteen, anxious to rejoin his men, which, to accomplish, rested solely in a horse, an animal of barter, bought in a range mart.

One's mount is good company on a journey. 'There's our course, little horse,' said the youth, glancing to the southwest. 'Our wagon's camped off in there somewhere, and you and I must look it up. The boys will be expecting us, and we'll grope our way down to the Smoky and try to locate the camp. Did you ever see the mirages come up so near? If there isn't a church, with a steeple, right on our course! And here on the left is a fleet of ships, sailing proudly, their sails glittering like white silk, and on our right is a heavy forest and lake. But these mirages can't fool old-timers like you and I. Rack along, my Spanish king, we may have some little trouble in finding the wagon to-night.'

The plain is known to her own people. An unbroken horizon of mirages possessed no fear for the horseman, as he held his course on that September morning. In spite of the optical illusions, the sun would hold its way, its quarter seen or sensed, the plain would cool and the mirages rise. With hope beating high, the boy rode into the glare of the heat-waves. The time passed unnoticed, the sun beat fiercely down at noon, the sweat crusted into scales, yet the horse never checked his volunteer gait, snorting defiance to the slightest restraint of his rider.

Conversation was almost continuous. 'Take it easy, King,' urged Joel. 'We don't expect to make the wagon by supper-time. Just so we strike near enough to get an outline on the Smoky, before dark, is all we want. Slack up a mile or two.'

Water was found near the middle of the afternoon. It was a sickly rivulet, and, after a short struggle from its source, sinking again in the sands. Yet the instinct of the Spanish native expressed itself in a single neigh; he turned abruptly on his course, and cantered up to the oasis in the plain.

'You're a safe guide, old boy,' said his owner, dismounting, 'and we'll rest a spell. All I know is, that we held our course. When these mirages lift, the outline of the river ought to be in sight. I'll unsaddle you, and a good roll and a drink and an hour's grazing will brace you for the evening's ride.'

As dawn comes or the moon rises, the lifting of the mirages threw their shadows in advance. Rising near and far, like clouds in the sky, one looks under them, as through a well-kept wood to the fields beyond. Joel was alert, and as the illusions lifted the broken country revealed the river in the distance.

'Come on, old scout,' urged the rider; 'the bugle calls to saddles. Can't you see the brakes of the river in the dip of the plain? All right, a swallow of water now, and a good drink when we reach the Smoky.'

The course of the day ran quartering to the river. The boy had crossed the country during the spring

round-up, and as the mirages lifted, clearing the horizon, he began to recognize the contour of the country bordering on the expected watercourse. Darkness fell, the early stars shone forth, and after an hour the river was reached. With only a slight swerve from the day's course, the way led up it, when again the horse neighed, was answered by his kind, a light flashed forth, and a ranch was hailed.

'Any work going on at present on the range above?' inquired Joel, in response to a voice which answered his call.

An old man groped forward and peered into the boy's face, silhouetted against the night. 'Is this young Wells?' queried the voice, in kindly tones.

'Yes,' eagerly replied the youth, dismounting. 'Well, if it isn't Mr. Saddler. Yes, I stayed over-night at this ranch in July.'

'Your outfit is at work above, and you were expected to return yesterday, so our boys reported. Lead your horse around to the saddle shed.'

'Not to-night, thank you,' politely said the boy, fearful of offending range hospitality. 'Have you any idea where our wagon's camped?'

'You're not thinking of riding on to-night, I hope?' said the old man. 'Your horse must be badly fagged.'

'Oh, no,' said the youngster, with boyish pride. 'A good roll and a swig of water, and this horse is good for a hundred miles. If possible, I must make camp to-night. Honest, I must.'

'Really?'

'If I make the ride to-night, it's done; if I wait until to-morrow, it's a broken day. Let me off to-night, and I'll drop in and see you and Mrs. Saddler in a day or so.'

The old ranchman yielded, but reluctantly. 'Oh, well, if you must ride through to-night, we won't quarrel about the color of the duck eggs. You're welcome to the trip; from what I gather, your wagon is up at the North Fork, possibly at Mustang Springs to-night.'

'Give me the directions,' said Joel, swinging into the saddle.

The old man laid one hand on the horse's neck and the other on the saddle horn. 'If you are a good night hawk, you can make it in twenty miles. After you round the next bend of the river, bear off to your left, and take the evening star for your course. If your horse is good for a seven-mile gait, in about an hour turn right and cross the Smoky. The river forks a few miles above the crossing, and after that follow up the North Fork. If this is a cow-horse, he'll hardly pass the wagon without nickering. Now, it's up to you, but you're welcome to pot-luck with us to-night.'

'Thank you just the same. Bearing to the left, above, is to avoid the north bend of the Smoky?'

'To cut the big horseshoe.'

The boy and the ranchman parted, and the landmarks were carefully noted and passed in due time. 'Old scout, do you see the evening star over there?

That's our course. And only twenty miles. Why, we'll make it in three hours. Shuffle along, old boy; shake out a reef, show your Spanish blood.'

The course and the night were as easily threaded as if by compass or sun. The North Fork was traced for an hour, when, in turning a bend, a beacon light flashed in the open. The horseman halted, and among the few voices of the night, a herd song arose, smoke was scented, the horse champed his bit, and was allowed cautiously to approach the sleeping camp. There was danger of running amuck of the cattle in hand, on their bed ground, and, once the latter was located, the reins were slackened and the horse cantered up to the bivouac. A lantern hung on the wagon-tongue, elevated like a flagstaff, the embers of a fire smouldered, over which the horse shied and snorted, when several figures arose in their blankets.

'Whose locoed horse are you?' came the challenge.

'That you, Jack? Did you tie up my night-horse? Well, I'm home again and ready to stand third guard.'

'It's Joel,' said a chorus of voices. All dropped back in their blankets, but Sargent arose, and the chronicle of market and camp was reviewed.

'It's turned drouthy up on the headwaters,' said the latter, 'and the cattle are along the main creeks. We'll work the Smoky River country in half the time allotted. Why, we have over four hundred under herd to-night. You'll have a big shipment within a week.'

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'Good enough. Manly and Dell started for the Beaver this morning, and will be in with the last shipment in about ten days. It will be a close race which ships first.'

The work of gathering the strays along the Smoky was easy. Under a local drouth, of their own accord the cattle were more or less congested on the main waters, and the round-ups were made with little or no disturbance. Most of the ranches were shipping on their own accord, and, by working in harmony, two ranges were often worked the same day. Shortly after passing Saddler's ranch, a shipment became necessary, and the herd was turned north.

'Strays were scarce to-day,' said the foreman. 'When we come back, we can start gathering where we left off on the Smoky. We've got a big shipment of heavy beeves right now.'

Four days were required to graze the herd up to the railroad. On the second evening, Joel caught up the Spanish road horse, expecting to make another night ride in ordering cars. The cinnamon gelding had enjoyed a good rest, and, taking the north star as both course and beacon, the courier rode out of camp an hour before midnight. It was an easy task, marked by a dawn on the plains, breaking dull and gray, and ending with the rising sun, in a riot of color.

The ride was made with but a single halt. On reaching the station, almost the first person met was Dell Wells, and on a similar errand.

'Cars?' inquired the older brother, at first glance.

'Yes. Two heavy trains. We're grazing down eleven hundred.'

'We're coming up with eight hundred, mostly beeves.'

'I'm glad you're here,' admitted Dell. 'I was going on to the Smoky. Saves me the ride.'

The parlance of the range wasted few words. 'Ship about the same time,' mused the older boy.

'We figure on day after to-morrow.'

'Same here,' said Joel, turning toward the depot. 'Come on and we'll order three heavy trains. We can double the outfits.'

The cattle came like opposing armies to contend for some vantage-point. Like scouts, the owners and their foremen were well in advance of the herds, and meeting at the bleak station as if by appointment.

'Keep on your own side of the railroad to-morrow,' said Sargent to Dell and Manly, as the quartet mounted their horses to return to their respective camps. 'Sort up your beef, and I'll send a detail of my boys to receive and pen your cattle. Don't let any of that sorry outfit of yours straggle across the track. We have a reputation to protect, and we are particular who we associate with.'

'All right, sonny,' languidly replied Manly. 'You seem to forget that the store is on our side of the town. Better come in after dark.'

The loading out of three trains of cattle was a short half-day's work. Sargent's herd was counted as it left the bed ground at dawn, the mixed stuff

cut back, and twenty-seven cars of prime beeves corralled before the sun was an hour high. The drag-end was started for the Arickaree, under a detail of Manly's men, the wagon and remuda following. The latter outfit had camped to the north of the railroad, and once Sargent's beeves were penned, his outfit rode to the assistance of Manly, engaged since sunrise with sorting up the Beaver shipment. That task completed, the two contingents of beef crossed the railroad, and, for fear of engines, lay off in the distance until wanted. The trains arrived from a division to the west, were loaded with promptness, and moved on to their destination, the trains in charge of regular shippers.

The strays were reserved for the last train. The cattle gathered by Inspector Vance were separated and shipped in four cars.

'Did you want a list of these brands?' inquired Manly of Joel, as the gates swung behind the train of strays. 'I made a list as we cut them out.'

'Let the different inspectors claim their own. We might mail your list to the commission firm, so it could check up the work of the inspectors. My reason for shipping Vance's stuff separate is, he's looking after our interests.'

The outfits relaxed, and the banter of the evening before was resumed.

'Are you going to ask us to dinner?' inquired Manly of Sargent. 'No harm to mention it, as you might overlook it.'

'Not to-day,' frankly answered the latter. 'You boys are handy lads with cattle, but you wouldn't enjoy a dinner at our wagon. My cook is college bred, and he gives French names to dishes that you fellows wouldn't sabe. He comes of a good family, and I don't want to corrupt him by meeting any of this Beaver outfit. I told him, in case any of you came sneaking around, not to give you even a pleasant look. Better drop back to your own side of the town, where the store is, and eat sardines or overtake your own wagon.'

'Now, that's what I call a genial host,' said Manly to his men. 'Come on, boys: let's not insult them by refusing. No cook can bluff me with his wisdom. We'll translate any French into words that the home folks use. And that chef of yours had better set out the sugar or we'll upset the wagon, just to teach him manners. Boys, let's ride; I'm as hungry as a wolf.'

The two outfits ate together. During the limited time the temper of the moment was persiflage, as the crews, once the meal was bolted, must separate on their different ways.

'Well, if you fellows feed as poor as this right along,' said Manly, rising, 'I'll not trouble you soon again. It's a shame to ride a tired horse a mile out of the way to eat with a wagon that don't feed any better than this one. I'm not blaming you, Joel, but I did think that Sargent might have some little pride, some gumption, when given a wagon. Boys, let's

saddle up and overtake our outfit. This is the limit!

A month's hard work still confronted the outfits. Joel took Manly aside.

'Your next trick is to ship the beef on the Arickaree,' said he. 'Take our drag-end through with you. Bear off to the west to-morrow morning, and only touch on the upper end of the Beaver. If any of the outfit want to go into headquarters, they can pick up the wagon before you reach our old isolation camp. That's your course from here to the Arickaree. Dell knows McWilliams, and he'll give you the shipping routes. The idea now is to ship the beef as quickly as possible, double trains to Omaha or any other market.'

'How close will we ship?' inquired the Beaver foreman.

'Every hoof that has the flesh, including barren cows. I want to see how near that Arickaree Ranch will come to paying for itself with this year's shipments. We're going to gather the cattle astray, to an animal. In another month we'll know if we bought a bee course when we took over that cattle company. Now, ship all double-wintered and fat stuff. Those are the orders.'

'Down to the blanket,' agreed Manly, turning to Dell.

The outfits went their ways. Free-handed, Sargent dropped back to the Smoky. His work was brief on that river when the outfit crossed to smaller waters, and finally dropped down to the big bend of

the Arkansas, below Dodge City; from thence to the quarantine grounds on the State line, up the valley, occupied with ranches at work, and the task of gathering the strays continued unabated. At the end of the second week, a ten-car shipment was made, and the march of over a hundred miles up the main river to the Colorado line was celebrated near the end of September, by a final shipment of twenty cars. A summary of the cattle adrift from the Arickaree showed two thousand and twenty beeves marketed, with a remnant of over nine hundred remaining.

‘Is it time to shout?’ inquired the foreman of Joel.

‘Almost,’ replied the latter.

‘But you are willing to admit, at present writing, that we *have* gathered the Arickaree drift.’

‘And then some; over four hundred more than were supposed to be adrift. Old Mac’s accounts are tallying out. Of course, it was easier to charge the missing cattle off the books than to gather them. Small wonder the company went broke.’

‘Too much theory and not enough cow-sense. That seems to be the weak point in most cattle companies; long on red tape and short on sabe gets them in the end.’

Ten days previous a frost had fallen in the valley. A week later three frosty nights followed, the region affected extending from the mountains down the Arkansas River and halfway across Kansas. Quarantine was lifted, and any through cattle, under con-

tract or sold at Trail City, were moved to their destination. A remnant of nearly three hundred cattle was on hand, wintered and native, and the lifting of quarantine was welcomed by Joel Wells.

'We came within a few days of finishing one job,' said he to his foreman, 'before beginning another. Your next work is to take the Tin Cup herd to the Beaver. Let your outfit cross the river with this drag-end, and we'll throw it in with the Tin Cup twos. When you reach the South Fork of the Republican, you can send this remnant on to the Arickaree by a detail. They're velvet, but we want to send them to their home range.'

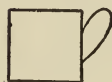
Joel and Sargent rode for Trail City. The foreman of the Panhandle cattle was quickly located, and plans for delivery the next morning were completed.

'Of course, you're short-handed,' said the boy to the trail foreman, 'but ride by our outfit and detail half a dozen of our boys and round up your herd. We'll follow within an hour, count this evening, and bed across the river to-night. When those twos leave the bed ground in the morning, you and your outfit are relieved.'

The herd fulfilled its reputation for Panhandle cattle. Sargent was delighted, but Joel, cautious as ever, was reluctant in his praise of the promising herd.

'Nice cattle, thrifty steers,' said he, at parting. 'Your herd will be a trifle big, but graze them along. I'll have to run into the city with this Texas fore-

man, but will be back in a day or so. You might touch at Cheyenne Wells. I may have some word for you. Yes, touch at The Wells, and ask for a letter or telegram.'



CHAPTER XIII

THE SOWER

JOEL and the Texas foreman left for the city. The latter had started his wagon and horses overland for home, and the only detail remaining was a mutual agreement on the count to the factor in the sale, as the settlement would be made direct to the assignee.

'You agreed on thirty-three hundred and forty head?' repeated Major Hunt, the next morning at his office.

The boy nodded consent. 'That's what four of us made it,' said the trail foreman, confirming the count.

'The cattle came up to expectations?' socially inquired the old factor.

'A nice herd, good cattle,' admitted Joel.

Disappointment showed in Major Hunt's features, and he turned to the Texan.

The latter surveyed the youth with a puzzled look, a glance which was full of meaning, and turned to the old man. 'That herd of mine had no equal at Trail City this summer,' said he, with defensive pride. 'Things have come to a pretty pass when Tin Cup cattle go begging for a buyer.'

'I know the reputation of your ranch,' said the factor, in mollifying tones, to the indignant trail boss. 'Tin Cup beeves have been coming to this

market every fall for the past fifteen years. Your cattle have established their reputation on every market. This young man simply don't know your cattle. Joel, you must be mistaken in this man's herd. Why, those Tin Cup twos are better than a government bond.'

The boy held a different view. 'I was born on a farm,' said he, looking from one to the other. 'No farmer ever shouts when sowing. Harvest is the time for rejoicing. Two winters must be met before these young steers are prime beef. Who is going to help me breast the storms and hold them until harvest is ripe?'

'I beg your pardon,' humbly said Major Hunt. 'I would be useless in your field.'

The Texan turned away. 'You couldn't give me, as a gift, one of these Northern ranches.'

'That's where you're wrong,' admonished the old factor. 'This market still gets its beef from Northern ranges.'

Joel's viewpoint was sound. Aside from the rigors of the winter, a drouthy summer on the plains was to be dreaded, when the calf crop failed, when beeves were gaunt as skeletons, and the old and the weak fell to rise no more. In that evil day, fortunate was the cowman who owed no one anything. The boy's dread of debt was not without valid cause.

The trail foreman went his way, and the youth and Major Hunt busied themselves over matters of mutual interest. A shipment of two trains had been

made from the Arickaree to Omaha, the sale sheets of which were in hand, while a second consignment was reported to ship that morning from River Bend to Kansas City.

'River Bend?' queried the boy, glancing over the telegram. 'Why do you suppose the boys are going south to ship?'

'Some good reason,' answered the old factor. 'There may be a shortage of cars on the upper road. It may be a matter of water. Your foreman never explains anything.'

'Joe Manly don't excite easily,' said Joel defensively. 'Any time that old boy changes the programme, you and I needn't worry. River Bend is only a few stations above Wild Horse.'

The shipment to Omaha was extremely gratifying. The sale statement reflected the quality of the beef from the Arickaree, and likewise threw a forecast over the shipment to follow.

'Your next work is to restock the upper ranch,' said Major Hunt. 'What are the offerings at Trail City to-day?'

'Some thirty thousand unplaced cattle there yesterday.'

'Start buying at once,' urged the old factor.

'One moment, Major. First, where are we coming out on the Arickaree? I'm still in the woods.'

'Where!' almost shouted Major Hunt. 'You answered that question when you gathered ninety-nine cars of beef cattle astray. One summer's work

put the Arickaree Ranch on its feet, and you have fears of the deal paying out! Every sale sheet showing your shipments netting you over forty dollars a head, and yet you hesitate!’

‘A cowman can go broke. I’ve met them, good ones. It’s the fear of debt that worries me. The other side of the ledger takes care of itself. How near will our balance come to squaring the Arickaree account?’

‘Near enough so that you needn’t worry. Your work to-day is to restock the Arickaree range. You admit that you were born on a farm: Solomon said, “He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand.” That applies to you. Buying cattle is your work to-day.’

The boy still insisted on his point. The two went over the accounts, beginning with the small balance after buying the necessary saddle horses for the Arickaree Ranch. In comparison with the comfortable margin remaining later, after taking up the Stoddard contract and the purchase of the Tin Cup herd, charged to the Beaver account, down to the known and approximate value of five thousand Arickaree beeves, the liabilities were but a shadow.

‘That’s better,’ admitted Joel; ‘that’s the way I want it. Our summer expense will be heavy, but we will cover it easily by the strays gathered for others and the excess cattle in the Arickaree holdings.’

'Excess cattle?' inquired Major Hunt, amazed.

'Yes. We gathered over four hundred head more than the company accounts showed adrift. Seems like it was easier to charge them off the books than to send out an outfit and gather them.'

'Well, well,' mused the old factor; 'that's the result of an incompetent management. That's the last chapter in that story. I had an idea that you boys would bring order out of chaos. How did you dispose of the drag-end, the mixed stuff?'

'Sent every hoof home to the Arickaree. They're velvet.'

'Good. Let's see,' continued Major Hunt, consulting a railroad folder. 'Yes, you can get a train for Trail City at noon. Can you start at that hour?'

'I ought to have a letter of credit,' said the boy. 'There ought to be some understanding ——'

'Letter of credit!' snapped the old man, interrupting. 'There's no occasion. Hereafter your account with us is an open one. Draw on us to cover your needs. And the only complaint we'll make is, if you refuse to restock your ranches the loss will be mutual, my boy. Will you start at noon?'

'Let me think it out first,' said Joel, meditating. 'I'll need Sargent with me. Give me a telegraph blank,' he added a moment later. 'Here it is. I'll wire Manly to bring his last shipment to Wild Horse, and send Dell to Cheyenne Wells to-morrow. That will relieve the foreman, and Dell can take the Tin Cup herd through to the Beaver. That leaves Sar-

gent free to help me do the buying. Next to Mr. Stoddard, I'd rather have our foreman with me than any one else. Jack's an all-round cowman.'

'Now, you're getting off on the right foot,' said the old factor, pushing a button.

'Get this off as soon as possible,' urged the youth, handing a telegram to the office boy.

'Then you're not going direct to Trail City?' questioned Major Hunt.

'No. Once Sargent is relieved, we can take horses and drop back to the river in a single night. Jack's due to cross the railroad to-morrow and has orders to touch at Cheyenne Wells. I have my saddle with me. It's clear sailing.'

'That's the talk. Restock your ranches is the slogan to-day. And bear in mind that this year ends the trail. So buy plenty, while the buying's easy. Our customers are complaining because their funds are lying idle in our hands. We must work together. Will the Arickaree carry six thousand more?'

'Easily.'

'And the Beaver?'

'Under present plans, it'll go into winter with over nine thousand head. That's about its capacity. There is danger of overstocking a range.'

The day hung heavy on Joel's hands.

'Now, remember the sower,' admonished Major Hunt, at parting. 'If he fears the wind or the cloud, he will not reap, and unless you buy cattle now, you will not have beef to ship two years hence. To har-

vest wheat, one must sow, and to mature beeves, you must buy young steers. The law is imperative — you must!

The next morning, on arriving at Cheyenne Wells, the only person to greet him was his brother Dell. The why and wherefore of the summons was explained in a few words.

‘I’m to take the herd through to the Beaver?’ repeated Dell.

‘Yes, and make a forced drive. Within ten days from crossing this railroad, you’re expected to deliver the Tin Cup cattle on the Beaver and return to Trail City. You know the route and the water, and we must wind up our work this month.’

Sargent had not yet appeared at The Wells. A range-man, however, reported having seen a trail herd the evening before, to the south, and near noon the expected foreman rode out of a mirage and cantered up to the station.

‘What does this mean?’ he inquired, as he dismounted.

‘It means that any programme is subject to a change,’ answered Joel. ‘You and I are going back to Trail City to-night. Dell will take your twos through to the Beaver.’

‘Am I spelled down?’ inquired Sargent.

‘You’re promoted,’ said the older boy, jerking his thumb toward Dell. ‘Salute your successor.’

‘I always like to congratulate a young man on his promotion,’ remarked the foreman, with due gravity.

'It warms up the cockles of my heart to have an old friend step from a common cowhand to a trail foreman, with a wagon, an outfit, and more cattle than Carter ever owned oats. Had it been any of the other boys except you, Dell, before I'd surrender my herd and mount of horses, I'd fight him at sunrise. But with you, an old pal that way, there's my hand.'

'You two needn't worry about me,' bristled Dell. 'I'll take your twos through to the Beaver. I know every waterhole from here to Hackberry Grove.'

'Talks like a Texan,' nodded Sargent to Joel; 'naturally a trifle boastful about his cattle or his work.'

The herd came up to the railroad and crossed near the bleak station. The new foreman was installed, two horses were reserved, while Sargent paved an easy pathway with his best men for Dell and the safety of the herd.

An easy night's ride and the two horsemen rode into the trail market at sunrise. Both were known as the buyer and foreman of the Tin Cup herd, which had left the quarantine grounds but a few days before, and their object was quickly surmised. They were besought by agents and drovers, but not until the offerings of the trail market had been looked over did they disclose their errand.

'We're on the market for at least one herd of steers,' admitted Joel to a group of sellers. 'Our account is in Kansas City, and any of you are welcome to look up our rating. Local banks here have handled

our paper before and our references are open to any one. We're willing to receive cattle here within ten days.'

General conditions favored the buyer. Barely fifty thousand cattle had arrived overland as the season's drive, over half of which, with quarantine lifted and winter approaching, were still unsold. The absence of buyers, a factor in the situation, was easily understood, when for over two decades Texas had poured her surplus cattle, millions in number, into the North and Northwest, and demand had ceased. A frenzied boom in cattle had collapsed, bankruptcy followed, and the days of the trail were numbered. Man and boy were aware that the law of supply and demand was in their favor.

In a single day the two looked over the market offerings. Within a week they accepted and branded three thousand young steers, the sellers gladly holding them until the arrival of the ranch outfits. Manly reported first, arriving at Wild Horse with a double train of beef, and asking for further orders. A second herd of equal numbers was accepted and branded, as no less than a half-dozen contingents formed its make-up, and the original Arickaree brand was run on every purchase.

Even a few more horses were bought. The test of both ranch remudas in the recent trying work had proved, beyond question, the wisdom of mounting men. Twenty-five extra were added and divided between the two ranches.

Manly came through in advance of his outfit. The first herd was bunched, and, on the arrival of the wagon, the cattle were taken in charge by the new owners. Dell and the other outfit reported on time, the second herd was received, both encamping on the ample quarantine grounds. It was the end of the fall work, and, with nothing pressing, a day off was granted.

'What's the chance to get a job with you?' inquired Sargent of Dell the next morning, as half the outfit rode for town. 'I can cook, horse wrangle, point a herd, or sing to the drags.'

'Manly's just pining to go back to Texas,' said the youngster, in confidence. 'Why don't you take his outfit and the lead herd?'

'And let you ride my string of horses? You have your nerve right with you, haven't you? I could never be happy with the lead herd, and you coming on behind, riding my fat horses. Ask me anything but that, Dell. Wear my clothes, complain of my chuck, but never lay covetous eyes on my mount of horses. Observe that line, and you and I may be brother-in-laws yet!'

The herds were camped to the north, and before reaching town the cavalcade was overtaken by Joel and Manly and accompanied by every man not on detail duty.

'Well, if old Joe hasn't on a white shirt and his war-bag tied to his saddle strings!' shouted Sargent. 'Honin' for the Sunny South, I reckon. Dell, there's a vacancy with the lead herd.'

The day was actively spent. Two reliefs left town before noon, and the boys on herd only changed horses, cooks and wranglers joining in the enjoyment of the holiday. An advance in wages had been made, and the men disported themselves like children.

The summer's work was reviewed, the Arickaree, in particular. In the beginning, a venture; in outcome, a veritable lost mine.

'It's time to shout,' said the older boy, who had all accounts in hand, to his foreman. 'Cut loose, Jack; there's no strings on you.'

'Come out here in the street,' ordered Sargent, leading the way, 'and let's dance the bear dance, four-handed. Salute your pardners! Hit the ground! Ichichiuhuahua!'

The foreman hopped around the others, as an Indian circles the fire, in the green-corn dance, chanting his weird incantations.

'That'll do, Jack,' said Joel. 'Yonder comes the marshal. You and Dell swing onto your horses. I'll see Manly off and overtake you in the morning.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE OLD CAMPGROUND

LIKE brigades of any army moving against some objective point the herds left the quarantine grounds. Dell led the march, which moved at a snail's pace, with Sargent bringing up the rear. The scarcity of water and the necessity of reaching it daily only brought the herds near enough to sight each other, but miles apart at rear or flank. During the morning and evening hours, the dips and swells of the plain cut off or revealed dust-clouds, indicating the location of each herd, while during the middle of the day the mirages, like curtains, hung on every hand, even obscuring the lead cattle from the rear of the marching column.

The herds reached the Arickaree without mishap. In advance of their arrival, Joel took a detail of men from each outfit and rode through to headquarters, to set the ranch in order to receive the new cattle. It was an advantage to the new arrivals, once freed, that they should not be disturbed again, and a round-up was necessary to brand calves and shape up the mixed holdings. An exchange of ranch patriarchs between the Arickaree and the Beaver, an infusion of new blood, was a part of the present programme. Ownership of the company assets, under their contract, had passed into the possession of the

brothers, and as intelligent ranchmen the danger of in-and-in breeding suggested an exchange of blood between the ranches.

On arrival of the herds, when approaching the home range, Dell bore off to the east, while the foreman pointed his herd up the valley of the Arickaree. Joel had the home work finished, and without the loss of an hour's time, once the herds were freed, the Beaver outfit received a contingent of ninety bulls and continued on to the lower range. Sargent's outfit took the cows and calves in hand, the latter numbering over six hundred, and promising a full day's work on the morrow. The branding over, nothing remained but the details of fending against the coming winter.

Joel tarried a day on the Arickaree. 'You'll need a car of corn,' said he to the foreman, at parting, 'and keep such help as you want. Get acquainted with these ranches on the South Fork of the Republican. You might cache a few sacks of corn with one of them, in case of winter work. All I can do is to make suggestions; but it's up to you, until further orders, to run this ranch. Hereafter, you're the big auger on the Arickaree.'

A long ride lay before the young cowman. Since taking over the second ranch, in passing back and forth the most direct route between the two ranges had proved to be, with commissary attached, through the sand-hills or former mustang range. Homing like a pigeon and with over a day's start,

the Beaver outfit held its course, and the task of overtaking it fell to the Spanish horse and his owner.

It was a lonesome ride. Trailing the outfit was too slow, and, taking a general course, the cinnamon struck his traveling gait and before the mirages arose he had lopped off a score of miles. Man and horse threaded the optical snares, the heat-waves rolled up like a burning prairie, but the course never varied. A short rest at noon, a roll, and the route was again taken up with renewed energy.

'Old scout,' said the rider to his horse, 'give me your best judgment this afternoon. Possibly you were born in a sand-dune country. My canteen's half gone, and you must take me to water before night. Remember, now, a fat camp, grass, and water; and try and make it before dark.'

The cinnamon, like a hound on a straight-away scent, held his course. Near the middle of the afternoon the horse sensed something unseen, neighed over the discovery, and instantly the trail of a remuda was picked up, the trace of cattle was noticeable, and a wagon track was found. The sign was an open book to his rider, and the gelding was given a free rein.

'I feel at home already,' said Joel, stroking the horse's neck. 'To-night both of us will fare well. This trail isn't over half a day old. Once the mirages lift, we'll sight the outfit. The boys know where they're going to camp. Rack along, old scout, and let's throw in with this cow outfit to-night.'

Like a bloodhound the horse held the trail of his own kind. The mirages lifted, an hour passed, and the sun sank. The horseman was uneasy when the cinnamon turned on an angle and his rider recognized a familiar country. A smoke arose among the dunes and the camp was soon hailed.

'Here you are,' said the rider, dismounting at the isolation camp of the year before. 'This Spanish horse has been trailing your outfit half the afternoon. I was beginning to doubt my own eyes when the smoke of this camp-fire was sighted. Boys, here's a horse.'

It was a lax camp. With the exception of two horses on picket, every animal, hoof and horn, was freed for the night. The remuda and cattle were in hand at sunrise, and, leaving Dell and half the outfit to follow, Joel and the others rode direct to headquarters on the Beaver.

It had been a busy summer, and the details of fortifying for the coming winter demanded prompt attention. Forage had been provided at the different camps, and corn must be brought in to meet the winter needs.

A single night was spent at headquarters. 'I must run in to the city,' said Joel, 'to close up the summer's business. I'll order the corn, and once Dell comes in, the first work is to brand the calves. No round-ups, understand, but gather the cows quietly. Give these new Tin Cup cattle time to locate before winter strikes. The work of the next

month is just the same as it was last fall. No one needs to point it out. You come from ranches, and fortify this one to meet cold weather. In other words, keep busy.'

Young Wells returned within a week. Over five hundred calves had been branded to the Beaver herd, the dug-outs were overhauled, while two four-mule teams were employed in freighting in a car of corn. Indian summer came and went, snow squalls followed, and the boys made ready to take up their winter quarters at the different line-camps.

Two extra men were retained in place of the foreman and Manly. On allotting the outposts, Quinlin contended for Trail Camp, at the lower end of the range, and insisted that Dell become his bunkie for the winter. 'In fair weather,' said he, 'we can drop down to the settlement and have dinner with Bessie Blair. The last time I saw her, she asked me an even thousand questions about you.'

'Bob and I are going to take The Wagon this winter,' instantly announced Dell, giving Quinlin a scathing look. 'What you see in those settlers gets me. And then we must give them our gentle cows.'

'Dale,' said Joel, 'the next time you have occasion to go down to the settlement, take that old bay pony, the one that the boys call "Mossy," as a present to Bessie. Just say that the horse is from an admirer of hers, from above on the Beaver. You needn't say who.'

'Come on, Bob,' said the younger boy, addressing Bob Downs, 'let's roll our blankets and move to the upper camp. We'll lash the bedding on a horse and leave for The Wagon right now.'

Another incident, of later effect, was a letter received from Quince Forrest. During the late fall, Don Lovell, in passing from his Northern ranges to his Texas home, had touched at Kansas City, and had made inquiry about the boys who, in days past, had sheltered his men and watered his cattle. Major Hunt was able to answer all inquiries, with the result that, on Mr. Lovell's return home, Forrest wrote his former protégés a letter of greeting. Further, the missive, at the instance of the old drover, urged a visit on the part of the brothers to the Lovell headquarters. 'Paul is at the ranch this winter,' wrote Forrest, 'and joins with me and old man Don in this invitation. The latchstring hangs out to you boys. Say when, and we'll kill a chicken and churn.'

The letter had reached the Beaver with the last load of winter supplies. Dell was still at headquarters and jumped at the invitation. 'We have passes to Kansas City,' said he, 'and possibly Major Hunt can get us others to Texas. Let's ask him.'

'Why not wait a little while?' urged the cautious Joel. 'The invitation will keep, and we may have some winter yet right here at home. I'd like to go, but there's twice as good a reason for staying on the Beaver. We're holding new cattle again this winter,

and we can't hold them and visit at the same time. What's most important comes first.'

'It's going to be an open winter,' airily said the younger one, raising an eye to the sun. 'One extreme follows another. Last winter was a terror, and the coming one is almost sure to be dry and clear. After the storms we faced last winter, the weather will never scare me again. The more cattle that leave the home range, the better off you are. We brought every hoof home on the round-up; wintered better adrift than those behind on the Beaver.'

'Quite naturally,' admitted the older boy. 'But that's no reason we'll turn the Beaver holdings loose. Ride your lines and hold the cattle are the orders for this winter.'

'We'll have to go on the round-up in the spring, anyhow. Whether there is a winter drift or not, the round-up will take place. We'll have to send out an outfit, even if we have no cattle adrift.'

'When your cattle are on the home range, you needn't worry about the work of rustlers. It's worth while knowing where they are. We'll ride the lines just the same. I sleep better when our holdings are under my eye.'

Joel's caution carried the hour. There was no question but the experience of the past year, both on the Arickaree and the Beaver, had strengthened the confidence of the brothers. An obstacle overcome imparts courage, and, after waging a good fight and losing cattle the winter before, a repetition

carried no dread over similar losses in the future.

As during the previous winter, the weather became a constant topic of interest. The early storms passed with the cordon intact, the holidays approached, the winter proving ideal, not only by the absence of snow, but in its bounty of sunshine. The month of January neared its end, dry, clear weather prevailing, and, with the sun coming nearer and nearer overhead, the terrors of winter lost their dread. The line-riders loafed along the circle, with hardly an incident to break the monotony of the daily task. Sargent, even, dropped down to the Beaver, and the question of the visit to Texas was revived.

'By all means,' said the Arickaree foreman when the invitation of the Lovell ranch was unearthed and re-read. 'What are you laying around here for? The backbone of the winter's broken, and you can take a little swing around the circle before spring work begins. Why, a widow woman could run either of your ranches this winter. Drop down to the Lovell headquarters first, and then come up through the Panhandle to the Stoddard Ranch. There's no question about your welcome.'

'When we parted at Trail City last July,' admitted Joel, 'Uncle Dudley urged me to come down and visit him this winter.'

'What more do you want?' insisted Sargent. 'He may have something in sight for you. There are ranches for sale in Texas. You bought one this

summer. I've heard of brands sold in that State that the beeves gathered paid for the entire holdings. Get out of here, rub elbows with real cattle kings, and you'll come home with new ideas. Preen your wings and take a little flyer.'

'Jack,' said the boy, 'in taking over the Arickaree, I never acknowledged my debt to you. You saw a chance in that ranch that was beyond me. Your years and experience are entitled to all the credit. It was your enthusiasm that led me into the deal. Some day I hope to remember you in a better way than with empty words. Right now, I confess my debt.'

'Joel,' said the other, with equal frankness, 'I wish you would get over being kicked uphill. Throw off a little of your caution. You've tasted success, and here you are pottering around like an old squaw, riding lines, when you ought to be scouting the country with a search warrant, looking for another ranch. The Arickaree is on its feet, and here I must pound you on the back to go to Texas. You confess my years over yours, and still you offer excuses to loaf around home. Get out and rub some of the moss off your back. Son, you're just like the little boy who refused to run an errand because he had stubbed his toe — the summer before.'

The boy admitted Sargent's charges. 'I admit the corn,' said he, 'but there must be a safety valve somewhere in our operations. More men have gone broke in cattle than ever made a success. This trip

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to Texas is purely a social one. Of course, we'll go. Hamlet, saddle a horse and ride up to The Wagon. Tell Dell we're going to Texas, and have him come down at once.'

Having carried his point, the Arickaree foreman was satisfied. 'It'll be the trip of your life,' said he approvingly. 'You boys will meet and mix with men worth knowing. It's bound to broaden you a few inches. You know only one phase of your occupation, the maturing of beef. When you come home, you'll have an idea of the breeding grounds of Texas. You're in the spelling class yet; after you make this trip you can read a little. Son, it'll take suns and moons and years to make an all-round cowman out of you. The past summer has been a valuable experience, but this visit among old friends will land you a rung or two higher on the ladder.'

Dell reported promptly, his enthusiasm soaring to the clouds. He had planned to return to the Arickaree with Sargent, but the sudden turn in the programme suited him better.

'What will Mr. Quince say when we blow in on him?' he repeated several times. 'What will he say!'

'A long way from home, that way,' cautioned the guest on the Beaver, 'don't tell your stories too scary. Don't excite the natives.'

The next morning headquarters stood at attention. One of the boys must accompany the brothers to the railroad, and Sargent volunteered to remain on the Beaver until the lad's return.

Verne Downs was detailed to bring back the horses. 'There's a dozen things to caution you about,' said the Arickaree foreman, at starting, 'but the main thing is never to get in a hurry. Take life easy, and don't offend Texas hospitality by thinking of leaving a ranch under a month's stay. Wear your welcome out, and then some. Among cowmen, don't insult any one by taking scrip for your journey. The only way you can repay ranch hospitality is to come again and stay longer. Let me see what else ——?'

'How about saddles?' inquired Joel.

'Take yours along. You're liable to thrash around a right smart, and you'll need saddles.'

'Anything further?' insisted the older boy.

'Yes. You'll meet women on nearly all the Texas ranches. Treat them with marked courtesy. They'll expect it, from the oldest woman to the youngest girl.'

'Girl!' gasped Dell, withdrawing his toe from the stirrup and turning on Sargent.

'Get on that horse,' said the latter commandingly. 'I've had to browbeat Joel into making this trip, and I don't want any trouble with you. Swing into your saddle, old pard, or you and I will split the blanket, here, right now, instanter!'

CHAPTER XV

GUESTS

'WANT passes to Texas?' repeated Major Hunt, greeting the brothers on their arrival at his office.

Joel's answer was evasive. 'We expect to knock around a month or two among the ranches,' he admitted.

'The outlook is promising,' continued the Major. 'Are you sure that this trip is purely social? Nothing else in view?'

'Nothing yet,' replied the boy. 'Why?'

The old factor paced the room. 'Well,' said he finally, 'there's a noticeable turn for the better, a brighter outlook in cattle. Straws tell which way the wind blows, and your sale sheets for last summer show better values than for the previous year. In the boom of '84, cattle values reached their maximum. Since then it has been an ebb tide. You must keep your weather eye open and trim your sail to meet these tides. Flood is setting in; now is the time to buy ranches and cattle. You must admit that the trail is a thing of the past. Nearly every Western State has quarantined against Texas cattle. You must restock your ranges. Where are you going to get your young stuff?'

'We'll have to buy them in Texas and ship them through,' admitted Joel defensively.

'Now you're my witness, proving my point,' declared Major Hunt. 'Why not breed your own, in a country adapted to breeding?'

'We branded over eleven hundred calves last fall,' somewhat boastfully said Dell.

'Of course,' testily admitted the old factor. 'Your calf crop ran about sixty per cent of your mother cows. Why not breed in a country where the percentage of increase runs ninety per cent to your holding of she cattle? Why don't you breed your own?'

Like childish fears, caution arose in Joel Wells. He and the old factor discussed the points at issue. The latter urged the importance of timeliness in action; that time and tide waited for no man; that the experience of the past was the only guide to the future. The elderly man insisted that this was a day for action; that the old order was changing; that the cowman of the future must look ahead; that economy and system must have a place, coupled with a constant vigilance, to wrest success from the calling of the ranchman.

The brothers left by the first train. The trip southward was marked by changing scenes almost panoramic in their nature. Night fell and dawn came like the fall and rise of a stage curtain, revealing the prairies of Texas, vast, boundless to the eye, and dotted with the eternal cattle. Color and atmosphere had changed between darkness and sunrise. The people were marked in stature, in simplicity, in

speech, a reflex of the open, having absorbed into their fiber not only the serenity of pastoral life, but the vitality to withstand its storms.

The Lovell Ranch had been advised of their coming, and Forrest met the train at San Antonio. The reunion of the three was simple but manly. Not a silly word was spoken. A handclasp, an arm thrown lovingly over each boy's shoulder, a deep, searching look, eye to eye, and a breach of nearly three years was bridged.

'Mr. Quince, you're getting gray,' said Dell, finding his voice with difficulty.

'I've been worrying about you,' answered Forrest. 'Every time a storm struck us, I knew there was a blizzard on the Beaver.'

'Last winter was a terror,' Joel managed to interject. 'Some of our cattle drifted over a hundred and fifty miles.'

'Let's cut out cattle talk,' said the host, leading off, arm-in-arm, with the boys. 'It'll take a solid week, working until midnight, talking over little things, to take the wire edge off this visit. Besides, I have a big hunt all planned out for you boys.'

'There, I knew we'd forget something,' said the older one. 'We only brought our saddles along. Sargent might have told us that we'd need guns.'

'Don't fret your cattle,' admonished Forrest. 'This hunt calls for more than squirrel and antelope firearms. Nothing short of an old Sharp rifle, throwing five hundred grains of lead, or a fifty caliber

repeater has any show in this hunt. Don't worry; we have an arsenal of guns at the ranch.'

The boys looked from one to the other. 'What — ? What — ?'

'We're going to hunt down a band of outlaw cattle,' said the host, anticipating the question. 'Old beeves, ten or twelve years of age, with a following of young fool steers. It's going to take good shots to drop the beeves and ropers to tie down the fool stuff.'

'That takes your measure,' said Joel to Dell.

'Let me see the ground first,' said the latter to his host.

'That would spoil the hunt. An old Mexican has been studying the lay of the land all winter, is out on scout now, and will report within a day or so. He will plan the hunt, to the last detail, and the rest of us will ask for a rope or a gun and fall in line. Think it out and choose your part.'

The Lovell Ranch was reached before evening. Paul Priest, one of the sponsors of the boys in their first struggles, had met them at the station, and the cup of welcome was filled to overflowing. Mr. Lovell was drawn into the bond of fellowship, showed a marked interest in the brothers, and freely joined the others in entertaining the guests of the ranch.

Tiburcio, the Mexican scout, reported promptly. He had studied, from every angle, the lair of the wild cattle. Their haven and fortress was a chapar-

ral thicket, oval in form and fully forty acres in extent, impassable to horsemen or to other means of approach. The outlaws were thus entrenched, and advantage must be taken of their daily necessity of faring forth for food and drink. Cautious as predatory animals, the lair was left during the early nighttime, and their return, at or before dawn or prior to sunrise, was the nightly custom.

Outlaw cattle are worthless. Had it not been for their evil influence on young steers, their reversion to the wild would have been no serious offense. But when they lured innocent ones, animals capable of being matured into marketable beeves, the ranchman resented it and extermination followed.

According to the old vaquero's report, the outcasts numbered ten head, three of whom were old, heavy beeves, designated by Spanish colors, while the remainder were mostly ones and twos, at least young enough to be worth saving. The scout had trailed the cattle to their watering-place, several miles distant, had anticipated their return to the haven at dawn, counted, classified them, and reported every detail to his master, Mr. Lovell. The latter merely authorized his trusty men to blot out the old and save the young. Hence the event had been held in reserve until the expected visit of Joel and Dell Wells.

Nothing now remained except to thrash over the details until they were agreed upon and accepted to the letter. Tiburcio's blood was Aztec, a thorough

scout, and his plans seemed feasible. Only the morning before, at daybreak, a full mile to the windward, he had watched the outlaws return to their lair. The exit and entrance to the haven, a beaten path, located during the light of day, was not even approached until midnight, and then only on horseback. The rifle range was even selected, equally distant on either side of the trail, depending on the wind, by breaking, near the entrance, twigs from mesquite bushes. The cattle might return on any angle, but were certain to converge near the entrance to the lair. The border of the thicket would also shelter the mounts of the ropers, who would ride out when the firing ceased, throw and tie the young steers, who always trailed behind.

‘Where to place my guests,’ said Forrest, nodding to Dell, ‘is about the only detail now lacking. Which will it be, a rope or a rifle?’

‘Give me that forty-five repeater,’ answered Dell, eyeing an array of guns in the corner of the room, ‘and I’ll throw as much lead as any of you. We have one like it on the Beaver.’

‘That makes you and I buddies again. We’ll drop the third beef from the lead. Who wants the first shot?’

‘Give Joel and myself the second one,’ said Priest, knowing that the old Aztec had done his best to make the hunt a success, and was entitled to open the attack. ‘That leaves the opening shot to Tiburcio and his buddy.’

With Indian stoicism, the former accepted his task. 'We'll need ten vaqueros to rope,' said he, in Spanish, to his superiors.

'Why so many?' insisted Priest.

'Two chances are better than one. Ropes are the surest,' was the reply, literally interpreted.

'Detail a man to go to the ranch of Don Juan Octavio and borrow five good ropers,' ordered Forrest. 'Have them report here at ten o'clock to-night. We'll furnish the horses. This hunt will move on the stroke of midnight.'

Forrest turned to the others. 'What else?'

'I'd like to try my gun,' insisted Dell. 'Some guns overshoot.'

'By all means, try it. Keep your lead off the ground is also important. Anything to please our guests. Was there anything further?'

'Better take a wagon along and bring home the beef — if you kill any,' said Mr. Lovell, qualifying his suggestion.

'That's my intention,' admitted Forrest. 'We'll cool it out and bring it home the next day — if we are good shots. What else?'

'Cartridges will corrode,' suggested Mr. Lovell, deeply interested in the success of the hunt. 'Test your ammunition. Quince, after all the planning you've done, if you don't kill those outlaw cattle, don't ever let me see your face again. Run off, if you want to, but no excuse goes with me. Make it war to the finish.'

'Hear that?' said Forrest, turning to his guests. 'That's like the boy, fishing for the sawmill. If he didn't bring home fish, his mother whipped him. Well, we'll bring home the beef or bust a hame-string trying.'

It was a busy afternoon. The best roping horses on the ranch were brought in, while five of the home vaqueros were detailed to rope and instructed in their duties. Like a veteran dealing with raw recruits, Tiburcio lectured his men to the last detail. There must be no conflict between the rifles and the horsemen; the latter must patiently stand at attention; until the riflemen grounded their arms, in success or despair, not a man must move; unless the heavy outlaws were brought to earth, nothing else mattered; while a single hoof of the outcasts was upstanding, at least two vaqueros were allotted to each beef. It was the will of the master, their good patron, and they, his chosen vaqueros, must not fail.

The detail of ropers from Octavio's ranch arrived early in the evening. With them, it was a gala occasion. Tiburcio failed to impress them with the fact that there was any danger; but finally succeeded in pairing them up with the home men. Each was furnished a saddle horse outbound, while the one chosen for roping would be led until the scene of action was reached.

An hour before midnight the ranch stood at attention. It was twelve miles to the thickety motte in a farther pasture, and the wagon, which left after

dark, would await the arrival of the cavalcade at the last gate. The riflemen, confident in their arms and ammunition, took two old vaqueros along to hold, within call of the promised action, their mounts in readiness.

The cavalcade left the ranch on schedule time. Spanish was the language, Spanish were the songs, crooned to the tramp of horses. Outbound, Dell raised a hundred questions. This hunt was different from stalking antelope on the Beaver.

Forrest quieted every fear. 'Shucks, Dell, this is just like shooting fish in a rain-barrel. If your nerve is as cool as it was this afternoon — well, I'll give you a clean kill. Simply couldn't miss the bull's-eye, could you? I may not fire a shot.'

'Suppose we wound an outlaw,' queried the boy, 'and he charges us, afoot that way, what will we do?'

'Stand up to him while you have a cartridge left, then throw your gun and take to a mesquite bush. Run your best; don't try and throw the race. A sure-enough matador would kill one of these beeves with a two-foot sword. You'll be hid behind a blind.'

'Did Tiburcio notice the color of the three big ones?'

'Two are hybrid Spanish, one blue or crane-colored, one a sunburnt brown, and the third is a pinto.'

'I hope that spotted fellow comes last. He ought to make a good target.'

'Let's not ask any favors. The chances are, if

Tiburcio drops the leader, the others will turn, which will give us an easy shot. Let them come as they will. We're enlisted men, regular veterans, and subject to Tiburcio's orders.'

The thicket was reached in good time. The wagon was camped a full mile from the scene, saddles were shifted, and during the dark hour before dawn, the men took up their positions. The wind was from the north, and the rifles took up their stand fully one hundred yards south of the trail, where the latter came over the rim or swell of ground and gradually dipped down to the chaparral in which the ropers were hidden.

A twittering of birds heralded the coming dawn. Tiburcio, sheltered under the rim of the ledge, scanned the horizon in the uncertain light of morning. The delay was tense, with every moment gained in favor of the rifles. Not an animal in sight and the sun had nearly risen, when the scout tiptoed back to the impromptu blind, whispering, 'They're coming. Let them come over the rim.'

The blue outlaw led the way. On being first sighted beyond the swell, the sweep of his horns, majestic as the branches of an oak, bespoke a mature animal, yet a condemned outcast to pastoral life. The pinto followed at the leader's heels, both with lowered heads, and within a hundred yards of the entrance to their lair. The brown came over the rim, a space between, lumbering like a buffalo, apparently in no hurry to reach his haven.

The moment had come. Two rifles, fired in unison on the count of three, merely dropped the leader to his fore knees. Four more guns spoke, and the pinto fell in his tracks, but the brown beef bolted back over the rim and halted. The ropers emerged from their shelter, fairly astride the trail, and reined in. Never relenting, Tiburcio and his pal, as opportunity offered, poured in shot after shot, without effect. Disgusted, the old Aztec forsook his blind, ran into the open and signaled up the ropers. The latter dashed forward, with ropes in the air, and the blue beef was promptly caught, while the others swept over the ledge, two of whom singled out the brown beef, the others turning their attention to the younger members of the band. Meanwhile the horses of the riflemen came up with a dash, and, once in the saddle, the men afoot breathed easier.

The pace was fast and furious. Before mounting, Priest and Joel Wells threw hats and coats, discarded their rifles, unlashed their ropes, and rode to the aid of the free lances. The blue beef outmatched the horse in strength and was fighting his way to the chaparral, the assistant roper unable to heel him, when Tiburcio, from horseback, attempted a shot at the brain. Like a knife, the bullet cut the rope around the horns, and the big fellow made a dash for his lair. But the second roper was onto him in a flash, the noose settled perfectly over the horns and ends were reversed. As the beef made the circle, the first vaquero, with a new noose in the only rope he

carried, dexterously caught the heels, and the crane-colored outlaw lay stretched like a dog in the sun. Tiburcio dismounted, fired a bullet into his brain and cut his throat. The vaqueros relaxed, slackened cinches, threw themselves on the ground, speechless through sheer weakness.

In the mean time, over the ridge, the fight went merrily on. In as many minutes seven young outlaws lay hog-tied.

'Let them rest an hour,' said Priest, mounting, when the last animal was securely tied. 'Let them tire out, when we'll free them and send them to another pasture. Seems like I heard shooting over in the mesquite flats. Come on, every one.'

A short gallop brought the ropers up to the last act of the morning. Loose horses, under saddle, located the scene and assured a safe approach. The sun was not even up, but the men lay sprawled on the grass, as if asleep.

'Where's your outlaw?' insisted Priest, as the horsemen reined in, to Forrest, who barely lifted his head.

'He broke every rope that we dropped onto him,' gasped Forrest. 'One of Octavio's vaqueros had to cut his rope to save his horse. Mr. Brown's lying in that little motte of mesquite, right there, quite dead. An accidental shot did the work. Dell nor I couldn't hit a flock of red barns. Some one dismount and take the boy's pulse. There he lays.'

'Don't worry about me,' sighed Dell, sitting erect.

'I'm not the only one that had "buck ague." It was my shot that dropped him.'

'Possibly,' admitted Forrest, rising. 'Anyhow, the brown beef didn't die of fright or old age. Out-law cattle, it seems, are not raised on sour milk. They carry lead like a grizzly bear.'

CHAPTER XVI

THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIP

THE first week almost neared its end before practical matters were reached. There was much in common between the boys and their host. Mr. Lovell was the owner of three beef ranches on the Little Missouri, in Dakota, had fought his way up from humble beginnings to an authority on cattle matters, and Joel Wells, stripped of caution, hung on his words with a hungering interest.

‘If my experience in cattle is of any value to you boys,’ said Mr. Lovell, ‘I want you to have the advantage of it. The lax methods of the past are giving way to safer, saner, but fully as profitable, ways of ranching. The old haphazard manner has changed, and to-day a cowman must conduct his business as safely as a merchant or a banker. In fact, it takes a broader judgment to breed and mature beef than to buy and sell and get gain. The ranchman of the future must be awake and alert to succeed. Selling by the quart or yard, or lending to meet another man’s necessity, is a rule-of-thumb occupation compared to yours or mine.’

‘Where do you get your young cattle to restock your ranges?’ inquired Joel. ‘You haven’t been seen at Trail City in two years.’

‘I’m breeding to meet my requirements,’ an-

swered the host. 'My Northern ranches are marketing fifteen thousand beeves annually, and we're shipping an equal number to replace them.'

'Do you breed that many steer cattle?' inquired the boy, amazed.

'Oh, no. Where once we allowed a cow to die of old age, not even saving her hide, we now convert her into a cheaper grade of beef. The spaying knife is freely employed, the imperfect and ageing are unsexed, and rapidly mature into marketable beef. A little prudence in ranch management to-day turns to thrift items that were once wasted. Cattle bones are even now turned to account.'

'The only cloud before us,' admitted Joel, 'is to restock our ranges. What method would you suggest?'

'There are only two ways,' replied the veteran drover. 'You must buy or breed. My advice would be to buy a ranch, already stocked. I bought one last summer, just to insure young steers for my beef ranges.'

'How many cattle are you going to need annually?' inquired Priest, addressing the brothers.

'About ten thousand yearly,' confessed the older boy.

'Then you'll need a ranch with stock cattle,' suggested Mr. Lovell, with decision. 'Call it what you will, common cow-sense suggests it.'

'I admit the need of restocking our ranches,' admitted Joel. 'Show me a chance, point out the

trail, let me see the wagon track, and I'll admit the corn. Major Hunt sparred a few rounds with us, but his theory and my practice are of different schools.'

Mr. Lovell laughed outright. 'Major Hunt is a fine old man,' said he; 'fills a niche and fills it well; but in practical matters, Paul or Quince are worth a field full of office men. We'll look into the merits of any ranch on the market. The one I bought last summer was taken over on Paul's judgment, and I'll lend a hand or you may have either of my boys.'

There was an earnest note in the old drover's remarks that robbed Joel of all caution. The confidence of a boy in a man was accented anew, and the two became inseparable. Days were spent together in riding over the ranch and in outlining the system employed in the larger cattle operations of the veteran.

'I want you to notice how uniform my cows are,' said Mr. Lovell, as the boys, himself, and his foreman rode through a contingent of cattle. 'Note these coming two-year-old steers; they won't vary twenty pounds in weight.'

'No wonder,' said Dell; 'look at their mothers. How do you keep your cows so even, up to such a high standard?'

'The survival of the fittest is our rule,' answered the practical ranchman. 'We no longer can afford to raise a scrub, and we weed out the culls.'

'Your cattle show very little improvement over the trail herds of four years ago,' observed the older boy. 'Don't you believe in growing the better breeds?'

'The climate governs that,' answered the veteran, smiling. 'Notice our men; they look like ramrods. Paul isn't a Texan, but look at Quince, the long, hungry varmint. The same rule applies to our cattle and horses. Spanish stock make the best cow-horses on earth; you know that. The ability of our range cattle to rustle a living or withstand a drouth is worth any two points in the improved breeds. The vitality, the rustling instinct, of our native cattle, must be preserved. It helps you and me to weather the winters on our Northern ranges. Why, these cattle of mine winter in Dakota like buffalo. They drift and weather the storms and winter like antelope. Their ability to rustle a living is worth more than a white face or a short horn. Environment governs all life, and while I follow cows that vitality that best wrests its livelihood from the waste places is my favorite breed. And our Texas cattle have it in abundance.'

It was the experience of a practical man. 'I don't mean,' continued the old cowman, 'that a slight infusion of new blood, say an eighth, would destroy the vitality which ages of environment have built up. Hunger developed cunning in the fox, and combating these deserts and plains of the West and Southwest have given us a breed of cattle to with-

stand its rigors. Why, these cattle of mine winter on cactus alone.'

Truly there are sermons in stones and good in everything. 'Do you mean to say that cattle eat this prickly pear?' queried Dell.

'Live on it, during drouths, by the year,' answered the host. 'Cactus has as much substance in it as a turnip.'

The brothers were being thrown in contact with the many phases of their occupation. Every day revealed something new.

'We'll ride through the dry cattle, the spayed stuff, on our way home,' continued Mr. Lovell. 'I want to show you a single item that more than pays the current expenses of all my ranches. This pasture is set aside for ageing cows, ill-colored and scrubby heifers. In the spring, after our shipments leave for the Northern ranges, we cull over our holdings of she stuff, pass them under the spaying knife, and they are given a pasture to themselves. It enables me to control my breeding ranches.'

The pasture was reached in due time. The improved condition of the unsexed cows was noticeable at a glance. 'They take on flesh better than a steer,' said the old cowman, 'and when fattened for the block, they kill and dress like a capon. It beats letting the weeds grow where they died. Every hoof in this pasture ships out in the spring, and after a winter in the North they ripen into perfect flesh. You can take any brand of cattle, and, with an in-

telligent use of the knife, in the course of a few years bring it up to a uniform standard.'

'The work would require a veterinary,' ventured Joel.

'Not at all,' vouched Mr. Lovell. 'Quince and Paul are experts with the knife. Either of you boys would pick up the knack in a week. All it requires is cow-sense.'

All too soon, the visit of the boys came to an end. 'We expect to pay Mr. Dudley Stoddard a visit,' said Joel. 'Why not run up there and get his opinion on any ranches for sale?'

'The very man I had in mind and the very man you need. Dudley Stoddard belongs to the old school. I could make a living in cattle where he would starve to death. He'll show you ranching from a different angle. He's worth knowing; but do your own thinking. By buying a ranch north of the quarantine line, your cattle are exempt, and you can ship them without fear of fever. My leaning is toward these upper ranches; better cattle, shorter run to your ranges.'

As in the present case, a telegram was sent advising the Stoddard Ranch of their coming.

'Don't hurry,' urged the veteran drover, at the final parting; 'take things easy. The buying of a ranch is an important step. These lazy Texans hang fire like a Mexican, and the only way to hold your own is to hang around and wear them out. From what I gather, the Panhandle country is nearly all for sale.'

'You'll lend us Paul or Quince, in case we buy a ranch?' inquired Joel, in farewell, striking hands with Mr. Lovell.

'Either of the boys,' nodded the old drover. 'I'd go along myself, but Quince or Paul's judgment is as good as mine. I'm ageing fast, and nothing longer counts much unless I can help boys like you to grapple with the chances that lie before them. Good luck, boys.'

During the brief visit at the Lovell Ranch a wonderful change had come over Joel Wells. A new field had opened, inviting to the brothers, and the older one had assimilated with an intense yearning the chances that opened before his view. No detail had escaped his inquiry or attention, and in contact and conference with Don Lovell, government contractor of beef, to army and Indian departments, trail drover, the owner of an even half-dozen breeding and beef ranges, a veritable king in his occupation, the boy turned with frank confidence.

'Did you ever see such thrifty yearlings as those on the Lovell Ranch?' inquired Dell. 'They lay over ours on the Beaver and the Arickaree.'

'They were born several months earlier, no winter to weather, and until they're two years old, they grow like weeds. After that age they spindle out and run to horns and legs. When they reach twos, so Quince and Paul say, is the time to move them to a Northern range.'

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The Stoddard Ranch lay on the Pease River. A change of cars was necessary at Fort Worth, where a day was spent to advantage. The latter would classify as a cow-town, the very atmosphere reeking with cattle clatter, while any evidence of a better day was not noticeable. Groups of men filled the hotel lobbies and discussed, with a gloomy air of depression, the outlook for cattle. Only five years before, the keys of the city had been tendered to a cattle convention, marked for its revelry and wide attendance, but now it was as quiet as a deserted banquet hall. Had the town been in possession of a foreign army, the general dejection would not have been more marked.

The boys surveyed the situation. 'In cattle matters,' said Joel to Dell, aboard the train, leaving, 'it must be the dark hour. Listening to those men around Fort Worth, you get the impression that school's out. But it isn't. Cattle are a little too staple an article to pass away. We have too many sale sheets to take that view. Because Texas can't mature beef is no reason the fair's over. Mr. Lovell and his men don't think so. Show me a good ranch and we'll buy it.'

Mr. Stoddard had received notice of their coming and a conveyance met the boys at the station. The ranch lay off the railroad some thirty miles, and with little loss of time an ambulance and fours, with an outrider, started for the Pease River Valley. Both driver and mounted scout were Mexicans, and,

save for a word, nod, or gesture in reply to questions, the boys were left to their own amusement. The country was much the same as the Northern plains, the grasses similar, while the cattle encountered came in for a close inspection. On one occasion, Joel borrowed the outrider's horse, made a wide détour, riding constantly through cattle and overtaking the ambulance after an hour's scouting.

'There's a thrift about these cattle that marks them apart from those of the lower country,' announced the older boy on retaking his seat in the conveyance. 'No wonder Panhandle steers command a better price at Trail City than those from southern counties. These are big-boned, rangy, solid-colored cattle. The twos will almost compare with Arickaree steers of the same age.'

The ranch was reached shortly after dark. That a hearty welcome awaited the brothers, due to past acquaintance with Manly, and at the hands of Mr. Stoddard and family, was assured. The existence of the latter had never before been mentioned by the old cowman, and on being presented to a motherly woman and seven, from below Dell's age to well above Joel's, the majority of whom were girls, the brothers met a complete surprise. Fortunately the warnings of Sargent, when leaving the Beaver, were remembered by the eldest, and with an innate frankness he greeted the different members of the family as frankly as he had the host at the gate. Dell managed to stammer a word or two to the

mistress, who in turn presented her four daughters. The boy's hand fell limp, mumbling his greetings in a vague, formal way, yet as indistinct as the grunt of an Indian.

'Now you've met the family,' said the host, 'except the three girls that are away at school. You can always tell a Stoddard by the nose, naturally a big-nosed breed of folks — tell them as far as you can see them, tell them as easily as you can Pan-handle cattle on a trail market. Now, I'll show you boys your room, and mother will skirmish up something to eat. This way, Joel.'

Supper over, the boys were excused on the plea of travel-tire. Morning revealed, in contrast to the Lovell headquarters, a typical Texas ranch of the home type. In many respects it was baronial, the roomy house with its broad verandas, its Mexican quarters and bunk-houses, around which was an acreage and herd sufficient to sustain easily the title of cattle baron. A hospitality of simple charm radiated from the home, reflecting the beauty and peace of pastoral life, which flowed as serene as the river before its door.

An old acquaintance with the master and the motherly offices of the mistress soon placed Joel on a friendly footing. Knowing his own weakness, Dell avoided the many advances of the girls, but Mrs. Stoddard, a mother of three boys, with a tact and sweetness which only a woman possesses, by easy stages led the bashful Dell into her confidence and companionship.

Dell Wells, however, was not entirely at ease. 'Have you inquired if there are any ranches for sale in the Panhandle?' he questioned his brother. 'Let's get away from here as soon as possible.'

'That's contrary to all advice. When visiting a Texas ranch, it isn't manners to mention your errand before the middle of the second week. We've been here only a day, and Uncle Dudley and I haven't squared off yet for the big medicine talk. Right now, we're gathering the Arickaree cattle adrift on the Smoky. We can't possibly reach the final shipments before the latter part of the week. I'll lead up to our errand just as soon as possible. I can see that Manly has broke his rope trying to amuse you. Your nerves are badly shot and a few nights' rest may do you good.'

'What's the use of waiting so long?' growled the youngster.

'There's no hurry. We haven't turned the edge of our visit yet, and won't for some time. I'm just beginning to feel at home. And I notice Mrs. Stoddard is taking quite a fancy to you. Nice folks, ain't they?'

'I wish I had stayed at the Lovell Ranch or gone on home,' ruefully said Dell. 'If there were any outlaw cattle to hunt ——'

The first week came to an end, Dell chafing under the chains of kindness. As on the Lovell Ranch, recourse was had to daily rides, if not with Mr. Stoddard, with his boys or Manly, when the gamut of their common occupation was revived.

When the question of securing a breeding ranch finally intruded, the necessity had already suggested itself to the host. 'Of course you must,' said he approvingly. 'Your Northern ranges are maturing our cattle. All this lower country is fit for is breeding; and with upper ranges on which to mature your beeves, it gives you a perfect control of your business. The only reason I didn't mention it sooner, I had a hope of selling you my twos and threes this spring. You'll have no trouble in buying a ranch. It's only a question of which one suits you best. I see nothing in the way of your buying two ranches if you want them.'

'One at a time will be enough,' replied Joel. 'We can make a liberal payment next fall. Until then, it wouldn't matter where title rested, so long as we were allowed a free management.'

'You can name your own terms. It's only a question of ranches; the cattle run all alike.'

Mr. Stoddard knew the country for hundreds of miles around. Cowmen, whose dooryard gates were forty miles apart, were considered near neighbors, while a ride of several days covered close friends. The host spoke of the headwaters of the Pease, or down on the Big Washita, or across Red River in No-Man's-Land, as a city resident might mention the house across the street.

A careful canvass of the country tributary to the Pease River suggested a ranch near its source. No cattle had been sold from its holdings the summer

before, with a crop of steers, coming threes, each year's increase for several seasons past, running in excess of three thousand calves. Its total holdings were supposed to number, ranch run, about fifteen thousand cattle and ninety sections of land.

'This ranch on the Upper Pease would be my choice,' advised Mr. Stoddard. 'It will give you three thousand young steers of an age to move to your beef ranges. Land at six-bits an acre can't hurt you, and it entrenches you for all time. This range runs into the brakes of the Staked Plains, is unfenced, with outside range to carry double its present holdings. The land was so taken up as to control the water, and these deeded sections represent only a small per cent of the outlying pasture. Three dollars an acre was refused during the boom for the land, and seventy-five cents now won't rob you very much.'

Mr. Stoddard's advice was acted upon. Manly and the brothers visited the ranch, being absent some ten days. On their return it was necessary to revisit Fort Worth, as the sale of the ranch was in the hands of a bank in that city. The old ranchman readily offered to accompany Joel, the ambulance was ordered out, and hasty steps were taken to connect with the first train.

'I'm going along,' announced Dell, with decision.

'Make yourself right at home where you are,' answered the brother, as if he were the host and not a guest. 'We can't afford to take you along. Any

boy who is afraid of a girl wouldn't make a good impression on a banker. Away from home this way, your place is in the tall grass. Now, don't run on the rope and give me any trouble.'

Before the boys could contend further, the ambulance drew up at the gate and the family gathered to bid bon voyage to the outbound travelers. In taking his leave, Joel acquitted himself in a manner creditable to his years and limited chances.

'I'm leaving Dell with you,' said he to Mrs. Stoddard. 'Now, don't let your girls tease him. They say that bashful boys make good husbands, and if that's so this brother of mine may come out of the shell and make quite a chicken yet. You'll be good to him, won't you?'

CHAPTER XVII

FREE GRASS

THE outbound trip was featureless. Mr. Stoddard was a customer of the bank in question, and repeatedly appeal had been made to him to come to its aid; if not as a buyer himself, he had been urged to find one. The two discussed the range of barter, and on reaching the city the plan of attack, retreat, and re-attack was clearly outlined. Joel remembered the long, patient haggling of his host, the summer before at Trail City, over a few horses, and felt that the present venture would call to the front any latent ability, as a trader, that the ranchman possessed.

‘Leave matters to me,’ said the latter, ‘but you do the kicking. Find every fault you can with the ranch. Complain of its past management, its saddle stock, the cattle; haul off like a hungry ox. Offer resistance even to my suggestions. These bankers may try to show us where to camp, but you and I have slept around a wagon too long to go to town for advice. We know a cow as well as they know percentage.’

A cordial welcome was extended by the cashier to the old and young cowman. Mr. Stoddard introduced his guest in his customary gruff manner, while the boy apparently took a deeper interest in the costly office furniture than in a mere bank official.

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The latter was a cocksure, precise man of advanced years, painfully observant in his manners, and not wholly free from the fawning sometimes seen in a greengrocer. 'A cowman from Colorado,' he repeated, melting with politeness.

'Or Kansas, or both,' roughly corrected Mr. Stoddard. 'Runs beef ranches in both States. Taking a little visit through Texas in search of a breeding ranch. The firm's known in the upper country as Wells Brothers.'

'Really,' said the banker, bowing his callers to seats.

'Y-e-s,' growled the grizzled cowman, sitting on the corner of a mahogany table. 'Y-e-s, young-looking; but then a cowman must crowd twenty years of his life into four or five to hold a place in the race. Banking is not near so strenuous. Well, the boys have been my guests, out at the ranch, and I sent them up and had them look over the Captain Albion assignment, now in your hands. If you can offer any inducement, young Wells will talk the matter over with you. You've been hounding me to find you a buyer, and here he is.'

Briefly the bank official stated that, in taking over, as an assignee, the settlement of an insolvent trust company, the ranch in question was found among its assets.

'Our State is paying the penalty,' said he, 'of inflated prices in land and cattle, locally known as the boom of '84. Liquidation is fairly under way,

and within a year or two there ought to be a turn for the better. Mr. Stoddard is an exception to the rule; he weathered the boom, but most of our cowmen went down, with the result of throwing a large number of ranches on the market. The banking interests of the State suffered severely and must share in the general loss.'

The banker offered to submit a schedule of the effects of the ranch in question.

'I have ridden over the ranch,' admitted Joel, 'and have a fair idea of its holdings. My interest will depend on the inducements offered.'

'We'll try and make those liberal. You might mention your requirements.'

The boy arose and strolled about the room. 'The main inducement would be a fair price and a working chance to place the outfit on its feet. The ranch looks like a widow woman's farm gone to seed. The only item of ready value is the coming steer crop. The cows run ragged. Modern ranchmen use the spaying knife freely. Your foreman hasn't kept the she stuff up to a point to ensure a vigorous increase. You're not getting a full per cent of calves to your number of cows. Then the remuda is scrawny; I noticed several mares among your saddle stock. That range needs a cowman in charge and needs him every minute. I couldn't shape up that brand of cattle under three years. That is, place it on a thrifty basis.'

'That's the result of a banker running a ranch,'

thundered Mr. Stoddard. 'They remind me of a blind man.'

'Our interest in ranching is not a matter of choice,' smilingly answered the cashier. 'Not voluntary on our part. Until we can find a buyer, a rigid economy is necessary.'

'But your system of economy is penny wise and pound foolish,' contended the old cowman. 'What that Albion Ranch needs is a sure-enough foreman. Then you would get results.'

'Possibly. But we are not in the cattle business. We are selling our holdings of land and cattle.'

'Here's a buyer, then,' insisted the old cattle baron. 'Don't let him get away would be my advice.'

The banker set a price per head on the straight brand and Joel shaded the figure an even dollar. 'You have a thousand cows on that ranch,' said the boy, 'that I wouldn't count. If we make a trade on the entire holdings, I'll count that many as nothing. They've outlived their days, dead wood on any man's hands.'

The boy mentioned a small earnest payment, as a matter of good faith, and a second one in six months. 'The management to change on May 1st, and any form of contract to bear that date, the cattle to be counted over to us the week before, and at your expense. Title may remain with you, but absolute management must fall to the buyer. Here are two references, and Mr. Stoddard will make a third. You'll find me at the hotel.' The latter remark was addressed to his host, as Joel withdrew.

'There's your chance,' urged the grizzled ranchman. 'Next fall I'll take off your hands any unpaid cattle paper bearing the signature of Wells Brothers.'

'It's a very small earnest payment,' remarked the official, with the usual caution of a banker, 'but I'll wire our correspondents in Kansas City and San Antonio, and we will have a report within a day. Why do you advise the sale?'

'Because I sold them two trail herds in the past and they protected their credit to a day. Their best asset is their ability to mature beef. They have the ranges. Their office is in the saddle, and there are no leakages in their business. If any one can work out a cattle proposition and put it on its feet, they can. That boy showed me the sale sheets on over seven thousand beef cattle marketed last fall, and if occasion required he can show them to you.'

'Then he ought to have more ready money,' commented the banker, his commercial instincts flashing to the fore.

'How many cowmen, including myself, have as much idle money lying in your bank?' The question was asked in a withering voice.

'I'll take the matter up with our directors at once and by to-morrow we'll have the rating of the buyers. Your guest will surely grant us that time to look up his standing.'

'Say until the close of business to-morrow?'

'That will be ample time.'

The old cowman lumbered out of the office. His

long acquaintance with the banks of the town made him a welcome caller, and it was several hours before he returned to the hotel.

'Well, son,' said he to Joel, 'I think you have bought a ranch. I made a little inquiry, and I find that this insolvent trust company is the old cow's calf, an offspring of the bank, which accounts for the one acting as assignee for the other. That was my inkling from the first and I have just had it corroborated. The bank will want its money and you will get the ranch. Stand firm on the offer which I suggested and you made. They may run on the rope and snort like a cow on the prod, but they'll come to their milk. Rest easy; you'll get the ranch.'

The boy had given, as reference, the commission firm in Kansas City, and Don Lovell to the south. There was no question about either report, and the boy felt justified in outlining his plans.

'In case we buy this ranch,' said he, 'Mr. Lovell promised us one of his old men. We know him, and I want him to get a line on the cattle well in advance of delivery. I'll have to go home and I want him on the ground at the earliest moment.'

'Send for him now,' urged Mr. Stoddard. 'The ranch is yours, and we don't want to waste an hour lying around here. He can go right on home with us.'

A message was sent to Mr. Lovell, asking for Quince Forrest. The former would readily understand, with appeals from different sources, that some deal was pending.

'If any one pulls the wool over old Quince's eyes about a ranch, I'll pay the reckoning,' announced the boy.

'That's the idea,' approvingly said the old ranchman. 'Show them from the drop of the hat that you know your business.'

The next day the two reported, near the closing hour, at the bank. In addition to the cashier, two directors were in waiting in the private office. The latter were introduced, and all five drew chairs around the table.

The cashier came to the matter at issue at once. 'Your rating is sound,' said he, nodding to Joel, 'but your earnest payment is out of the question. In a transaction involving this amount, one fourth down is the minimum that we could accept.'

'Very well,' replied the young cowman, rising. 'We had that amount lying idle, but if the earnest payment is too small ——'

'Your credit is reported good in cattle circles,' interrupted the cashier. 'You could easily obtain a loan.'

'To buy your old cows?'

'The holdings of the Albion Ranch are thrifty cattle.'

'No one need vouch for them. I rode that range recently, to my heart's content.'

'Now, here,' interjected Mr. Stoddard, 'you boys will never make a trade, hauling off like oxen. Try and pull together or I'll wash my hands of this deal.'

'Mr. Stoddard,' said Joel, bowing to the old cowman, 'I must protect my interest. To do so compels me to think for myself. After riding over the Albion Ranch, it's useless to tell me what the cattle are. Besides, this deal saws off on me nearly sixty thousand acres of land. On our old ranch on the Beaver, we're running nearly ten thousand cattle on a homestead that cost my father fourteen dollars. We're carrying over twenty thousand head on two ranges in the upper country, and our landed holdings haven't cost us as much as the furniture in this room. It doesn't take much cow-sense to know the advantage of free grass. These ranches over in No-Man's-Land, with free range, appeal to me. Money in cattle runs up rapidly, but land is a dead horse. May I withdraw my offer?' The question was addressed to the cashier.

'No, no,' interceded the old ranchman, 'let the trade stand or fall as the difference of opinion between buyer and seller.'

'Land at seventy-five cents ought to be cheap enough to run cattle on,' suggested an old director.

'Just six-bits an acre more than free grass,' replied the boy. 'Figure up ninety sections of land and that will show the dead capital in this sale. I simply prefer to have that amount in cattle and on a free range.'

Joel's argument stood like a stone wall. It was the epoch of free grass in conflict with deeded lands, the former influencing the latter, and the banker

winned under the advantage that fell to the youth.

A pause followed, only broken as the young cowman continued: 'My statement of yesterday regarding your holding of steers and our full management, after May 1st, calls for a word of explanation. If we take over the ranch, every steer falling two or over this spring will be sent to a Northern range as soon as grass admits. Title may remain in your hands, but their maturity into beef begins at once.'

'That's impossible,' said the cashier, rising. 'Please don't impose any hardship that will prevent a trade. The very idea! Move the holding of two-and-three-year-old steers out of the State!'

'It's your privilege to declare the deal off,' said Joel, edging towards the door. 'My offer may stand while Mr. Stoddard and myself are in your city.'

The boy bowed himself out and a stormy session ensued. 'I was afraid matters might come to this pass,' regretfully said Mr. Stoddard. 'It's the result of one occupation trying to tell the other that the old cow is a beef. That boy knows his business fully as well as you gentlemen know banking. You wouldn't be holding the sack to-day had you not advanced money on inflated cattle values. The business of Wells Brothers is on a sound basis. Yours isn't, or you wouldn't be sweating blood to sell a few ranches in your hands. You fellows have the money instinct, but you lack cow-sense in cattle matters.'

'Would you advise a transfer in management

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which would permit the most valuable cattle to be moved to another State?' questioned the cashier.

'As long as title remained in my possession, yes. My neighbors call me a cowman, and I sold these brothers herds, where the title remained with me until the cattle crossed the scale, as beeves, on a market. You're not dealing with cattle-thieves. You bankers must learn to measure up a man by some other rule than percentage. If he's good seed corn, give him rope, and your ship will come safely into port.'

'Would you advise our selling on such a small earnest payment?' questioned a young director present.

'I have offered to take any unpaid paper next fall.'

'Will you enter into writings to that effect?' continued the young bank director.

'If my word is not considered good, yes.'

There was a note of resentment in the old cowman's answer and the cashier rushed to the breach. 'Your word is the equal of your bond,' said he, suavely pouring oil. 'However, there is still the difference of a dollar a head in the price that remains to be bridged.'

'Let it remain unbridged. If I were buying the brand, I'd buy it at the boy's offer or you could keep your ranch.'

'The offer does not meet the liabilities,' politely protested the cashier.

'Anything it lacks, charge it up to your tuition as

bankers, and shake hands among yourselves over the sale.'

'But there are a number of other items, a remuda, stock horses, and a complete ranch equipment,' insisted the old director.

'The tail goes with the hide,' announced Mr. Stoddard, moving, hat in hand, toward the door. 'We'll catch the first train for home and look at some ranches in No-Man's-Land. Young Wells leans toward free grass, and I don't blame him. I'm not buying grazing land at six-bits, and if you gentlemen want any more at that price, I know where you can get a million acres. It's your move.'

The cashier followed Mr. Stoddard into an ante-room. 'You believe these brothers to be worthy young men, entitled to any credit we might see fit to extend?' insisted the former.

'Absolutely. All they ask is a working chance, and I know of no one who can pull you out of the mire, the equal of these boys. Their annual harvest of beef will buy a new ranch every year. If you are not satisfied with the references furnished, the banks of your town are sending practical men here and there, looking after cattle paper. Why not send one of them to look over the ranges of these boys in the upper country? Then you would know for yourself. With title remaining in your hands, it gives you ample time.'

'I'll let you know within an hour,' said the cashier, with a friendly bow.

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There was a slight swagger in the old cowman's walk as he returned to the hostelry. At a glance, Joel noticed the beaming eye and satisfied smile.

'Did they come to our terms?' eagerly inquired the boy.

'It may take an hour yet, but they'll come. A banker's mind moves slow, like interest accrues. They like to keep their cattle in vaults. We'll give them a little time. They broke their necks to loan their money, and now it breaks their hearts to lose a cent. Son, that free-grass talk of yours broke a rib in that poor cashier. A banker would rather loan his money and lose it than to buy land at a sheriff's sale. We can't get a train before to-morrow, anyhow.'

Within an hour Mr. Stoddard's forecast was fulfilled. 'We have decided to give you a working chance, as you call it,' said the cashier, extending a friendly hand to Joel. 'The ranch equipment, including saddle and stock horses, go in for full measure. The holdings sell, range run, everything under brand to count.'

'Every hoof under brand, one year old or over,' corrected the boy.

The cashier nodded. 'Seven dollars for cattle and seventy-five cents for land. Call in the morning, and we will have duplicate contracts ready for our mutual signatures.'

The bank official withdrew, and Mr. Stoddard threw an arm around Joel's shoulders. 'It's a comfort to my soul,' said he, 'to make a banker lick salt

out of my hand. I've had to lick it out of theirs several times, but to-day they came to you and me. Given half a management, that ranch will pay for itself in a year or two. Don't I know those Albion cattle? One crop of beef and the slate's clean!'

A message was received from Forrest, to the effect that he would arrive in the morning. It would barely allow time to execute contracts, meet the train, and catch another for home. By a slight margin, the old cowman and his protégé met the passenger from the south.

'There's old Quince now,' said Joel tensely, as the expected arrival swung off; 'that long, hungry ras-cal!'

'Did you bring your saddle?' inquired the boy, once introductions were over.

'I always carry my saddle and pocket-book,' languidly answered Forrest. 'Something up a tree?'

'Nothing but a ranch, and you are to take charge of it. Supposed to be about fifteen thousand cattle, up on the headwaters of the Pease River. Mr. Stoddard will be your neighbor — about a hundred miles apart.'

'Is that all?' sighed the newly appointed foreman. 'I figured that you might be getting married and wanted me to act as best man.'

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SPRING CAMPAIGN

IN its cattle and acreage, the present venture far exceeded the Arickaree purchase, and with a liability almost equal to that of the latter range. To take over a breeding ranch required a courage that few cowmen possessed; but a necessity, akin to that destiny that shapes our ends, compelled the brothers to look to the ranges of the Southwest for their future supply of cattle. The Albion Ranch, neglected, bankrupt, became a necessary link in the chain of ranges under the management of two boys, and in the simple production of one of the staples of life.

‘Boys,’ said the old ranchman to Joel and Forrest, aboard the train en route home, ‘it takes all kinds of people to make a world, even in cattle matters. I can’t recall any one who could take that old Albion Ranch and put it on its feet like you two. With a Northern range, you can shape up your holdings, mature your beef, and place your mother cows on a thrifty, vigorous basis. I couldn’t handle that ranch at any price. I’m land and cattle poor. But I catch the drift of your plans; you boys will pull that ranch out of its present bog hole. Those bankers will never forgive me, but really they ought to shake hands with themselves all day over their wonderful luck.

The ranch was a dead horse on their hands. Yes, they sold an elephant to real cowmen.'

The return trip became a social jaunt. On reaching the Stoddard headquarters, Dell was found a willing Caliban, bearing logs for every Miss Miranda on the ranch.

'Wearing your Sunday suit every day, are you?' questioned Joel. 'Think you may settle down in this country?'

Dell ignored all questions.

'Well, we bought the ranch,' continued the other, 'and we'll leave it in the morning to put Quince in charge. He'll lay the summer plans and act as look-out until we take possession. Better go along.'

'I simply can't,' loftily answered the younger one. 'The girls and I have planned a ride for to-morrow afternoon. We're going out to an old Indian camp, burying ground on poles, and the like. There's old mortars there where the squaws ground their corn. I want to see all that plunder while I'm here.'

'By all means,' replied Joel, with a touch of irony. 'That's important. Next to buying a ranch, that old Indian encampment is of right smart consequence.'

The older boy and Forrest left at sunrise for the new ranch. Near noon of the second day, they reached their destination, and notice of a change of owners was welcome news to those in charge. Such accounts as were kept were brought forward, and from the most available sources at hand it was be-

lieved that the brand would tally up to expectations. Several days of constant riding confirmed the belief, and an intelligent outline on the situation was reached.

'The first hard work on this ranch,' said the new foreman, 'is to prune out this dead wood. Between now and taking possession, I'll build a spaying platform and swing my windlasses. Within a year or two, these mongrel colors will pass into beef stuff. The knife is what this ranch needs.'

Another item, of more than ordinary worth, was in the two bands of stock horses. The dams were improved Spanish mares, the sires selected from saddle breeds, while the offspring reflected some man's foresight in an ideal horse for cattle use.

'Just what the ranch needs,' agreed Forrest. 'It gives you about thirty geldings coming on every spring, to build up your saddle stock. It beats buying horses. At idle times we can gentle the geldings to the saddle. Any time that this ranch don't need them, you can send a car of young horses to your beef ranges.'

Until date of possession, the foreman would remain at the newly acquired ranch. Supplies must be laid in against assuming active management, and, in taking his leave, an old Texas custom of escorting the departing guest a few miles, at least, was duly observed.

'Here's where we pull together,' said the boy to Forrest. 'The management of this ranch is in your

hands. If my plans work out, I may call on you for all the twos and over, in steers. They ought to have the benefit of the coming summer in the upper country. Arrangements to that effect are still a trifle misty; I don't see my way clearly. But I'll be back to clerk for you during delivery week and to take possession. Somewhere from three weeks to a month.'

The return ride was made with two relay horses under rope. The advantage of a change of mounts lessened the task, and the long ride was covered with frequent shifts of the saddle. Joel had been absent from the Stoddard Ranch over a week, and with the spring advancing, he was anxious to return to the home range.

'What's the use of my going home?' protested Dell, when the older one outlined his plans. 'If you're coming back within a month, I might as well stay here.'

'You might, but you won't,' answered Joel. 'Recess is over; it's books with you now. If you stayed here much longer, you might wear out your new suit. If the boys on the Beaver have had any spring storms, you'll have to take out a wagon and go on the spring round-up. So lay off that pink shirt and get into the collar again. Make your adieus, because we're due to catch the first train for home.'

The older boy's return was a hail and farewell call. The ambulance was ordered out, and, while Dell complained to the family of the injustice of out-

rageous fortune, its host and the older boy were engaged in more serious affairs.

'I brought down an extra horse,' explained Joel, 'so as not to bother you any further. My only regret is, that we may never be able to repay you. I hope the chance will come some day.'

'If not to me, don't miss the chance to show it to some one else. Still, your chance may be right at hand.'

A pause followed. 'You mean ——?' queried the boy. 'I hardly understand you.'

'Well, you heard me complain of being land and cattle poor, and I've thrown out hints of no buyers in sight. This ranch has full thirty-five hundred steers coming twos. What am I going to do with them?'

The boy looked the old cattle baron squarely in the eye. 'Wait until I come back and I'll talk to you. If a summer range can be secured for through cattle, I'll take the strain off your ranch.'

The brothers barely touched at Fort Worth on their homeward journey. A pointed call was made at the bank, details of delivery discussed, and the homing trip continued. On arriving at Kansas City, the commission firm was visited and there a welcome awaited the boys at the hands of Major Hunt. The latter was aware of some deal pending by the reference and the presentation of a draft for payment, and explanations followed.

'My idea exactly,' said the old factor approvingly. 'You must expand your business. A foothold in the

breeding grounds of Texas is an absolute necessity. What can we do for you?’

‘Well,’ admitted Joel, ‘our account with you is in red ink. There are over three thousand young steers on this ranch, coming twos and threes, that ought to be moved to a Northern range this spring. We’ll have to ship them and a freight bill must be met.’

Major Hunt made a hasty calculation. ‘About one hundred cars,’ he announced, ‘or four trains. Say at two dollars a head, six or seven thousand dollars will cover the freight and feed bills. We’ll take care of that. What else?’

‘We’ll both be busy from now on. Could you take up this matter of shipping for us?’

‘Gladly. Give me your shipping point and destination.’

‘Neither point is definite yet. Say from some station, tributary to the Pease River in the Texas Panhandle, to some common point on the Big Sandy in Colorado. That’s as near as I can give them to you right now.’

‘That’s near enough. Anything further?’

‘I’ll not be back this way, and, if you can get me a pass from Denver to Fort Worth, it will come in handy. There’s only the one railroad.’

The old factor made a memorandum of all the details. ‘Now what else?’ he questioned.

‘That’s all. Any idea what the winter’s been, west on our ranges, since we dropped down the country?’

'A squally March. Short drifts of cattle reported.'

'There's work for you,' said Joel, turning to Dell.

The brothers left for home. The next evening found them on the Beaver. The outposts had been abandoned and the line-riders were at the main camp. Report of a stormy March was confirmed; several drifts of cattle had crossed the Prairie Dog, the emergency camp on the latter had been called into use, while the possible loss of cattle adrift was a debatable question.

'It doesn't matter,' said the older boy; 'you lads won't have anything to do but to go after them. The Smoky will be the limit of this winter's drift. We got off easy.'

A single day was spent on the Beaver, when Joel announced his intention to cross to the Arickaree. Dell threw out a number of hints, looking to an invitation.

'You needn't hint around me,' said the older one. 'Until further orders, your place is right here on the Beaver. Another trip to Texas and you would be useless. Lay off those good clothes and climb into the saddle again.'

'You surely don't mean,' protested Quinlin, with injured innocence, 'that during idle days Dell and I can't drop down and call on Bessie Blair?'

'Of course,' replied Joel, meeting Quinlin's banter, 'it's all right to be neighborly. Be sure and take Dell along, and let me know if any symptoms of romance crop out. He showed some funny signs in

Texas recently, in kitting up to girls, but a good summer's work may save him.'

'I'll keep an eye over him,' assuredly vouched Quinlin. 'I know those symptoms; boys about Dell's age show them along about the last days of school. Folks call it spring fever, but that isn't the right name. Still, I think Dell will like Bessie.'

Joel left for the Arickaree. His arrival was a surprise to the ranch, which reported having weathered the spring storms with little or no cattle missing. The pressing question was to secure a summer range, and with that end in view the matter was referred to Sargent. 'We want to bring the new cattle as near home as possible,' suggested the boy.

'Any ranch running stock cattle ought to want them,' said the foreman. 'Branding calves in the fall won't disturb through steers very much, and the cows and water will hold them. There are several stock ranches on the head of the Arickaree and on the South Fork of the Republican. We'll saddle up and circle around among the neighbors a few days.'

A week was spent, and two ranges, one conditionally, were selected, west on the Arickaree and South Fork, the trip ending at River Bend on the Big Sandy. 'Fifty cents a head is nothing for summering a steer,' said Sargent. 'Better pay it than to overstock your range. The extra finish that you'll get on your beeves will meet the bill. Let your shipments come a week apart, and I can meet any new cattle with my own outfit.'

'Leave room for three men. We'll have to use ranch hands for shippers and give them jobs.'

Joel wired his location to Major Hunt, and received advice to report to the offices of a railroad in Denver. On presenting himself at the capital city, he was welcomed by the live-stock agent of the road, and, with a map before them, the two went over the details of the proposed shipment. The agent was a practical man, and once the summer ranges and the location of the Panhandle ranch were pointed out, the live-stock solicitor summed up the situation at a glance.

'Grass and water being important items,' said he, 'Estelene, in the Panhandle, suggests itself as your nearest and best shipping point. Coming in from the headwaters of the Pease, you'll find the corrals on your side; no railroad tracks to cross, immense wings to the chute leading into the yards. A shipping crew, a cow to lure in your herd — oh, you'll find everything right at hand! Now, about a thirty-six hours' run will lay your trains down about here, say at Sidney, in Colorado, or on the headwaters of the big Sandy. Or we'll build you an unloading chute between stations. A few days' drive, and your cattle are on their summer ranges. It beats trailing them overland. Besides, our road is giving you cowmen a passenger schedule on through cattle. You see, we expect to ship them again, as beeves. Try our road once, and you wouldn't trail cattle with the country open and quarantine lifted.'

Cautious as ever, Joel made a few general inquiries. Cattle were liable to be moving to Northern ranges in such numbers as to tax the carrying capacity of any railroad, and, with a summer range secure, expansion was the policy of the brothers.

'We can use about ten thousand cattle in restocking our beef ranges,' said he, 'and have a second herd in view, a few stations lower on the Pease River. Could you handle it on a week or ten days' notice?'

'Easily. Take your shipments up with me by wire, and I'll put it up to the freight department to handle your cattle. We have borrowed a thousand extra cars for the month of May.'

Instead of a pass, Joel Wells might have had a private car for the mere asking. He was more at home, however, in the caboose of a cattle train; in fact, completing his journey in a freight, having dropped off at the suggested shipping station in the Panhandle. The yards, their approach, a general survey of the surrounding country and its sustenance, were studied to advantage. A horse had been left at his destination, and by ten o'clock of the same night he rode into the Stoddard Ranch.

'I can talk to you now,' said the boy to his host. 'The question of a summer range is settled.'

'Can you use my twos?' inquired Mr. Stoddard.

'If you'll deliver them on the Big Sandy and wait for your money until we thrash our buckwheat.'

'What's the freight?'

'A trifle over two dollars a head.'

'What are they worth to you?'

'We paid sixteen dollars for Tin Cup twos at Trail City last fall. How do they compare with yours?'

'Same country, same cattle. How many can you use?'

'Your straight twos, and all the knotty threes that you want to throw in for good measure.'

The old ranchman strolled around the room. 'Let me sleep over it first. When I awake in the morning, I'll answer you.'

'You deliver your cattle here in the shipping pens and we'll receive them at their destination in Colorado. Considering time, wear and tear of horses, and general expense, there isn't over a dollar a head difference between shipping or trailing a herd. And a quiet summer on the cattle on the upper ranges ought to be worth that amount.'

With the men of the open, sleep possessed a magic charm. The concerns of the day were forgotten, and the troubles of yesterday were easily solved in the awakening hour. Only a few minor details remained to be agreed upon between host and guest, not the stroke of a pen being considered necessary between man and boy.

'Now, you're sure you won't raise the long yell,' said the ranchman the next morning to Joel, 'in case we tender a herd of over thirty-five hundred head? Our twos will run about that number, but I aim to saw off all my knotty threes on you. You're sure you won't kick on the numbers?'

'Only this,' warned the boy; 'if either you or Joe Manly try to slip a long yearling in on me as a two-year-old, I might enter a mild protest. But if you do, all I ask is not to laugh about it in my presence. Go off behind the corrals and roll on the grass, laughing over the long yearlings you delivered to me as twos. That's all I ask. Show good wagon manners.'

'Now, here,' said Manly, 'you must have heard of that trick in the upper country. Among old friends, this way, you can leave it to Uncle Dud and me to treat you white. You're an old friend, come a long ways, and we'll try and remember it. We'll not roll our wool in the sand, in order to sell you a few cattle.'

'You try any tricks on a customer of this ranch,' thundered the old cowman, 'and I'll take a rope and wear you out. I'll burn the ground with you. Come on, boys, mother's calling us to breakfast.'

CHAPTER XIX

HUNTING THE MUSTANG

WITH the departure of Joel for the Arickaree, a month of idleness lay before the ranch on the Beaver. The elder brother would not return, the new ranch taking him to Texas, and Dell felt encouraged to preen his wings.

‘Taking in more territory every year,’ announced Hamlet, the present foreman, ‘will compel us, at the home ranch, to look to the junior member of the firm for orders. That little swing around the circle in Texas did our boss a power of good. He comes back meaty with ideas; and we all heard the orders of the real boss to the junior member to lay off his Sunday best and to get into the saddle. That means business; and I’m wondering what the programme is going to be this spring.’

‘Don’t you worry about me,’ countered Dell. ‘Once the word comes that Joel’s in Texas, this outfit’s off on a mustang hunt. I met that half-breed over on the Republican last fall and we talked it all over. All I need to do is to crook my finger and he’ll come charging. Just wait until Joel gets out of hearing. He’s rode me around the big corral long enough. It’s my time to issue orders now. I may drop over to Reil’s ranch and arrange with Le Roi to lead the hunt.’

‘Yes,’ mildly observed Quinlin. ‘You were careful not to mention it while Joel was here. One word out of him would have put a crimp in your mustang hunt. You and Reil must have hatched this chicken among the willows.’

‘If you don’t want to go, you can stay at home,’ jauntily said Dell.

At Reil’s ranch, on the Republican, lived a horse hunter, and during the many visits of the brothers the fact became known to him of the presence of mustangs within a few days’ ride of the Beaver. The man was anxious to lead a hunt, was experienced, and had offered inducements to be led to the range, either as a matter of profit or to share in the sport. Joel was the first to report the offer, constantly opposed it, and, now that he was absent, Dell and Hamlet kept the hunt a living issue.

‘You know the maxim of all work and no play,’ said the foreman to Quinlin. ‘No tournament this year, and it’s playtime now. Those mustangs are sniffing the air this minute, defying us to come out and play with them.’

The Texans at headquarters in a way knew the habits of the mustang, but lacked experience in hunting them.

‘Get that breed on the Republican to lead your hunt,’ urged Hamlet. ‘This ranch will furnish horses, but not to run a fool’s errand. Get a mustang hunter to lead your chase.’

‘May I ask what you’re going to do with your

mustangs when you catch them?' innocently asked Bob Downs. 'They might prove an elephant on your hands.'

Dell and Hamlet arose to their feet at the question. 'How an elephant?' insisted the foreman.

'Well, you've got to hold your wild horse and keep right on holding him. If ever you drop the rope on a mustang mare, she'll be missing the next morning, and a dozen saddle horses may be missing with her. You're sure to find cow-horses among mustangs.'

The warning of Bob Downs only served to heighten the anxiety to start the hunt at once.

'I'll go after the half-breed in the morning,' announced Dell. 'He can have the mustangs and we'll take the gentle horses. Le Roi's his name; he's French and Indian blood, and claims he can walk down mustangs; but with saddle horses it's quicker. He can have the mustangs, if any are caught.'

'Name that as a condition,' urged Bob Downs; 'make it final. Otherwise the breed had better not come. A mustang mare might stay a year, a perfect pet, and then some fine morning, it would be farewell, girls, count your remuda. I wouldn't give one good cow-horse for all the mustangs in the country.'

'Will you join our hunt?' politely inquired Hamlet.

'I may. Still, I'd like to know how you expect to make your peace with Joel, in case you kill or cripple a saddle horse or two. That old boy will come home and look over the saddle stock, and if there's a horse missing, Mr. Hamlet will offer the explanation.'

'I'll offer it,' said Dell, with finality. 'That's a river we'll cross when we come to it. What he don't know can't hurt him. I'm glad he isn't here.'

The second evening Dell returned with Le Roi. The latter had a light wagon for carrying fixtures, and four good saddle horses. A portable corral of light rope, woven into a web, hobbles, toggles, with fully a hundred old horseshoes, were among the plunder carried by the mustang hunter. The iron shoes were narrowed by a blacksmith, could be clamped around a pastern joint, and lashed on by the use of rawhide thongs. Le Roi explained how a horseshoe, by simply clamping it over a horse's pastern, compelled the animal to move in a walk. The toggle served the same purpose, but was not so severe. The half-blood almost convinced Bob Downs, while Dell hung on the hunter's every word.

Le Roi's dialect is difficult to repeat, as he expressed so much more in gesture than by words. 'Tie his hands and he couldn't talk,' said Quinlin, aside. 'Handcuff him and he would be tongue-tied. That's the way with these breeds.'

The hunter, however, was worth knowing, and the men plied him with questions. 'How many pony I catch?' said Le Roi, repeating one of Bob Downs's questions. He arose from the supper table to give his arms the proper sweep. 'Sometimes me catch hundred, nex' spring two hundred, mebby-so less, mebby-so more. Me catch heem thousand mustang hossy. Sacré! Me catch heem afoot. Catch heem

hossback. Pierre Le Roi he know how catch wild hossy. Corral heem. Yes, siree!' During this brief moment he had paced the room, gesturing wildly, his facial expression running from cunning to open confidence, and ending by diagramming a corral on the corner of the table, with his finger in the center.

'What I do with wild hossy?' repeated Le Roi. The question was Quinlin's. 'Mustang no good. Sell heem in settlement. Take heem up on Indian res'vation; trade heem off. Get fine pony; keep heem. How like my saddle hossy, all?'

'They look like they might turn a cow,' indifferently said Quinlin.

Le Roi was deeply wounded. 'No head a cow? My bay trail mustang like a dog. Trail heem all same like a bloodhound. My hossy no turn a cow? Well, by gar!' His hands fell and he dropped limply into a chair.

The important thing in hunting mustangs, according to Pierre, was to have the grass young and washy. It thinned the blood of a wild horse, and with corn-fed mounts the line of least resistance was the timely moment. The grass had greened and all signs were promising for the coming sport. No time was wasted. All who wished to join the hunt were welcome, and the second morning after Le Roi's arrival, the party sallied forth.

The question of grass circles, a mystery of the plains, was submitted to Pierre.

'You or your ancestors ought to know what caused

these thousand-and-one circles,' said Quinlin, half in arraignment.

'Buf'loo,' answered Le Roi. 'Wan year come heap rain, beeg grass, mooch wallow. Mak' heep fly, skeeter, gnat. Mek' buf'loo prett' mad. She mek' beeg circle, mebbby-so hundred, mebbby-so thousand, all like sardines in box. Tramp, tramp all day, keep off fly. Bime-by, circle mud. Nex' year, beeg grass, noo circle. Heap circle!' The sweep of his arm indicated an empire.

The horse wrangler from the settlement remained on the Beaver. Wayfaring men might call, and headquarters was left open. All the corn-fed horses were taken along, two wagons, tents, guns, provisions — equipment enough to ship a train of beeves was employed. At least two of the men looked upon it as an outing, while the others knew that ridicule, in case of failure, for years to come would be their reward. Among the latter was Dell, to whom Pierre Le Roi fully measured up to General Grant. The two were inseparable, conferring around the camp-fire until far into the night. With the boy, the coming hunt promised the fulfillment of deferred hopes.

'I want it understood in advance,' said Quinlin at the first camp, 'that I'm a guest of this outfit. I had permission to stay at home, but declined it. Now, I'm lending my moral support to the hunt. Write down this one thing; that if any one abuses a good horse to catch a mustang, you'll hear me raise the long yell.'

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'It was purely a matter of election with me,' observingly said Bob Downs, 'and I voted to go along. If ever I'm called up on the carpet by Joel Wells, my excuse will be that I went along to keep an eye over our saddle stock. If that isn't good, good-bye Beaver Valley, your cows and calves.'

The lakes were reached the second day at noon. A camp was made among the sand-hills, the horses placed under herd, and a general survey of the country made. Among the effects of Pierre was a field-glass, and, selecting the highest dunes, a council of war was held. The presence of the band was assured by signs around the lakes, and every one stood on the tiptoe of expectations.

A delay of several days followed, no one venturing out of camp except the half-blood. The latter located the band the first morning, kept it within range of his glass all day, and was rapidly locating the possible limits of the wild horses. Not until the latter's range was known or anticipated would the hunt begin. Pursuit must be made in relays, and there were many things to be considered; to capture the entire band required caution, and the breed was crafty and almost sleepless in arranging his plans.

The one promising feature was, on their present range the mustangs had never been hunted. There was also danger of their abandoning the country or splitting into contingents, all of which must be met and overcome. When to press the chase, when to relax, must be governed by the limits of the range, a

possible breach in the surrounding wastes must be anticipated, and Le Roi showed the mastery of a general in planning a campaign. He made long trips to every quarter of the country, and, after trying the patience of the outfit, he finally announced that the hunt would open in the morning. He had decided on six relays for the first day, the stations of which were marked by the topography of the range, and taking the first and sixth himself.

A fine morning ushered in the hunt. The band was ranging south of the lakes and camp. Hamlet was sent to the east, taking the second relay. Dell was detailed to the north, almost to the divide of the Republican, to turn the band in case it attempted to leave the range in that direction, flanking the mustangs from the outside of the circle. Bob Downs and Archie Lee rode to the outer limits on the northwest, a dangerous point, also to flank in the band and compel it to circle, pointing the wild horses through a gap in the sand-hills, where Quinlin lay in wait to send them on their way. Verne Downs covered the fifth relay station, an immense half-circle, the favorite range of the mustangs, turning them over to the half-breed, who would merely point the band in to the lakes. The plans, however, were only tentative.

The hunt called every man to the saddle. Archie Lee and Tom Singleton, new men who had joined the Beaver forces the summer before, were detailed as extra riders. An hour of sun was necessary to per-

fect the vision and give the horsemen every advantage.

On taking fright, without a halt the band ran twenty miles to the north. Turning to sense danger, Hamlet rode out in plain view, when the mustangs wheeled like cavalry in another long dash. A few shots sent them scurrying toward Dell's patrol, where they were flanked in by merely appearing, several miles away. Bob Downs and young Lee had a hard ride to flank them in, the mettle of their horses under test at the finish; but the corn that their mounts had eaten during the past winter told in the race and won a critical moment. Quinlin met the mustangs at a range so close that he declared that there were mules among them. Verne Downs believed the report, having himself ridden within a mile of them, dust interfering with a clear vision. Le Roi beamed; his plans were working.

Bob Downs sounded a dissenting note. 'There's a black stallion among them, the leader of the band, that can show us all clean heels. He can break the line any time he tries. Don't tell me that a naked horse can't outrun one carrying a man and heavy saddle. Tell that to the marines. That stud ought to be shot.'

'Me see heem,' mused Pierre. 'Prett' soon, me tink, mek' break. I'm some scare. Ba gosh, she's gran' hossy. Shoot, no. Bime-by, tire.'

A summary of the day showed that the mustangs had covered a hundred miles, while not a horse under

saddle had more than raised a healthy sweat. Le Roi assured his men that the band would drink to excess, would rest and stiffen in joint and flesh, and that he would start them again after sunrise. The same riders would cover the same stations as on the day before, while Bob Downs was supported by both Lee and Singleton, and dawn found the men riding for their assigned posts.

Shortly before sunrise, Pierre located the band, circled to the south, and started it over the course of the day before. The mustangs lacked the dash of the first surprise, hesitated, making sure of the enemy, and halting within ten miles. But the half-breed was on their trail, miles inside the main circle, and, after pushing them past Hamlet's station, he returned to camp for a change of mounts. No attempt was made to cross the watershed in the direction of the Republican, Dell, by riding only a few miles, sending the band twenty on the inner circle. Again an attempt was made to break the cordon on the northwest, but the trio, Lee, Downs, and Singleton, lay along the outside flank, spaced out to relay each other, closing in to within half a mile, when the mustangs yielded and took the pass through the sand-hills. Quinlin merely showed himself, loped his horse for a mile, fired his pistol, and leisurely returned to camp. Verne Downs and the half-breed finished the circle, as on the day before.

At the camp-fire that night a bevy of voices from the northwest lap were raised in protest, Downs acting as spokesman.

'Pierre, you must come out on our station to-morrow and see for yourself. That leader will make his getaway when the hour comes and take half the band with him. We gave him a run to-day, but he can turn the tables any minute he chooses. What we're here for is to rid this range of mustangs. Is that clear?'

The breed sputtered. 'Sacré! Me have two relay. Tek' M'sieu Dell. Tek' t'ree, four men. Ah, fin' hossy, swif', gran'!'

'Yes, swift enough to run over you and all your horses. He would have left the range to-day, only his band was too timid to follow him.'

'Archie can take my post to-morrow,' urged Dell, pouring oil, 'and I'll join you. I want to see that stallion at short range.'

'You're not the last court of resort. Pierre Le Roi is. Bring him along. The stable must be locked to-morrow. If that mustang gets away, this one of the Downs boys will hand in a minority report to Joel Wells. He isn't here, but I carry his proxy. Think it all over, you dear little girls.'

Bob Downs was in earnest. Quinlin favored the idea of letting no mustang escape. Hamlet took Dell and the breed aside. The result was that Pierre agreed that both he and Dell should ride on the northwest lap the next day.

At dawn on the third morning, Pierre took Verne Downs with him to start the band. Under rigid orders the boy circled to the south, surprised the

mustangs with a quick dash and a fusillade of shots, and returned to his own station.

Le Roi was pleased, returned to camp, changed horses, and reported on the northwest station an hour in advance of the arrival of the herd. Hamlet again received the wild horses from young Downs, pushed them hard for a few miles to the north, where Archie Lee was substituting for Dell Wells.

Dim pistol firing to the northward warned the quartet that theirs would be the next lap under test. Bob Downs urged the breed to hide behind a broken Spanish dagger and chance a shot at the determined leader.

'Here's where he attempted to break yesterday. Notice the lay of the ground; solid footing to the west, surrounded on every hand with sandy country. That stallion knows this range better than any of us. Let me hobble your horse and picket him to a Spanish bayonet. Crouch down behind that fallen dagger and throw lead with a vengeance. I see their dust now.'

Pierre's arms thrashed the air. 'No, ba gar, no! Big chief Pine Ridge res'vation, good frien' me, want heem! Get buf'loo robe, get buckskin, get moccasin. No, no, M'sieu, Bob. No, ba gosh!'

There was no time for argument. Singleton had met them, borne in on the band, closed to within a few hundred yards, and leading them by a safe margin for over a mile. Bob Downs relieved him, pressing the mustangs by a safe lead up to the point

where the attempted break was made the day before, when the band circled inward and came to a halt. Here the stallion lashed his harem with a savage frenzy with teeth and heels on rear and flank.

No mercy was shown. The tired mares took his brutal beatings and nursed their colts. It was a pathetic moment. On one hand lay freedom, on the other captivity. All that guarded the line was two horsemen who rode slowly toward the milling mustangs. The tyrant whipped his band up to within easy rifle shot, but, when he attempted to lead them to liberty, they broke back to safety.

It was the hunter's inning then. Two horsemen pushed them, rear and flank, until relieved by Dell, who instantly lost his head. Instead of merely pointing them through the sand-dunes, he raised the yell of a Comanche, shook out Dog-Toe, a favorite horse, closed in on the spent mustangs, fairly riding onto the weaker ones, and never reining in until the gateway of the sand-hills was entered.

'That's a boy,' smiled Downs to Pierre, as the trio jogged along. 'Better leave me at the wagon tomorrow. You could have shot that stud and ended this hunt. Tom here and myself fought all morning with M'sieu Dell to save his horse. You saw the answer. Might as well talk to mules. Mustang hunters, are you? There's your buddy, on a spent horse.'

'Say, men, that black stallion's a beauty!' shouted Dell, as the trio rode up from the rear. 'I could have

roped any one of half a dozen colts. And there's mules among them.'

There was a long, distinct pause. Neither Downs nor Singleton even looked at the boy, but rode on in silence.

'What is it?' insisted Dell. 'What's the matter with you varmints?'

'It's simply a waste of warm breath to warn you to save horseflesh,' regretfully said Downs. 'If Joel were here, the chances are he would allow you to carry that San José saddle back to camp. I'm not going to say a word, understand, that you run a good old horse two miles without any excuse. And after all our warning and your pledged word. Poor old Dog-Toe! And you always spoke so kindly of him, too! A breath of excitement seems to sap your gray matter.'

Dell and the mustang hunter fell to the rear. The others refused to ride away, and all four reached camp together. Hamlet was taken aside, and he received the report amid general laughter.

'Leave it to me,' said he. 'I'll take those cronies out in the dunes to-night and make a little medicine. I'll stage a little Injun pow-wow, with feathers fluttering. You couldn't give me one of those mustangs as a gift, with a barrel of sugar thrown in for sweetening. Not by a long shot will we tire or abuse a horse on this hunt. Dell must listen to me, or I'll beat the tom-tom so loud that our guest will see a great light; he'll see the hunt abandoned and a re-

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muda and wagon start home in the morning. Trust to me to lead those little Injuns in out of the wet. I'll cure those boys of horning the brush.'

The ruse had its effect. Pierre went back to his own station, of starting the band in the morning, and receiving it again at nightfall. Quinlin took Hamlet's relay, while Dell, banners trailing, returned with the quartet.

The latter left camp early. While en route to their post, the question of man-killing horses arose. It was fully agreed that it was more a legend of the plains than a fact, though Tom Singleton was inclined to the latter view.

'When cornered any animal will fight,' he insisted. 'A cow, even, goes on the prod. Mustangs kill each other. A wild stud will kill any horse. In Texas many a mustang stallion came into a ranch, killed his range rival, and made away with a whole band. This one may give us a fight. Bear in mind, he's a wild horse, with every instinct on the defensive. If ever he drops his eye on little Tom, I want to be a-riding my best horse. And I want my six-pistol handy.'

The scene was reached in good time. A standing Spanish bayonet afforded the base for a perfect blind and possible refuge. Other rubbish of the plain was gathered. Several fallen daggers were dragged up. The shelter was perfected with yucca plants and grass. The impromptu screen was perfect.

Hamlet agreed to handle the rifle. His horse was

taken a mile distant, unsaddled, picketed, hobbled, and side-lined. No chance must be taken on losing a good horse.

Dell took Singleton's trick on the line, while the latter remained where the break was expected. The band was tiring fast; it took actual riding to send them on a hundred-mile circle in a day.

The danger point was guarded by good rangers. All agreed that this was the exit and entrance, the gateway, where the band had entered or left the range for years past. To the west lay Colorado, a known range of mustangs.

The band was an hour late in reaching the western pass. The usual dust-cloud and pistol firing sounded the warning. Young Lee pushed them into Dell's hands, who flanked them down the line until Bob Downs received them, the stallion on the inner flank. At the expected point, under the lashings of a merciless master, the band wheeled westward, balked at the sight of a horseman, and fell to milling.

Then something happened. Suspicion took possession of the leader. The blind was only a little over a foot high, the Spanish bayonet had stood there for years, but a horse's sense of smell or caution proved the equal of human cunning. The instinct of self-preservation was alert. In primitive form, the black tyrant showed horse-sense.

Dell arrived. Hamlet lay motionless behind the blind, unable to make a shot. Three horsemen and a rifle now disputed the western passage. It was a tense moment.

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'Ride out and bait him,' suggested Downs to Singleton. The leader ignored the challenge. Dell advanced on the other flank. Same result. But when Downs advanced on the center, passing within a few feet of the blind, the stallion rushed out, ears lying back and head low, teeth bared, eager to meet his enemy.

The horseman lured him on toward the screen, when he suddenly raised his head, uttered a snort like a rifle shot, and retreated to the shelter of his band.

'What next?' inquired Dell, blanched in features, as the trio of horsemen met.

The question was instantly answered by the black stud. In a perfect frenzy he lashed the harem into action, into a gallop, heading straight for the rifle blind and Spanish bayonet. Ropes were shaken out, the horsemen scattered for room, advancing to meet the shock of the oncoming band. The leader was at the rear, shielded, when Hamlet arose to his feet, in plain view, and fired over the mustangs, now not a hundred yards distant. They whirled, veered southward, but the stallion never swerved an inch out of his course. Once clear of the other horses, the rifleman, at short range, poured in a murderous fire from a repeater. For an instant, nothing was clear, except as the horse jumped the blind, Hamlet side-stepped him as a matador does a mad bull, and planted a last shot with less than ten feet between the muzzle of the rifle and the mustang's heart. The black

swerved, staggered, halted, and fell, game to the last pulse-beat, every inch a king.

Singleton rode to flank in the band. Hamlet sat down on the ground, a silly expression on his face.

'The next time you boys have a mustang to shoot,' said he, gasping, as Dell and Downs dismounted, 'send and get a better man. With me, this is quits. I'm still dazed, and I may want to change my mind about man-killing horses. That Spanish bayonet saved my mutton. If it's all the same to you, this is enough sugar.'

Pierre accepted the report with good grace. 'Wan, two circle more, done,' said he, with perfect assurance. 'Two li'l colty die las' night, buzzard say. Ve-er-y bad. Prett' soon, home, rancho. Fin' hunt, catch plenty hossy, some mule.'

The fifth day required actual riding to push the mustangs around the circle, and toward evening they could be turned at will. A corral was built near camp where the wind had formed an abrupt bank in the side of a sand-hill and scalloped out a pit at its base, forming a half-circle. The wagons were parked against the bank, the web-rope stretched in extending the corral, wings were added with lariats and other ropes, making a stout emergency enclosure.

That night Pierre harangued his forces. 'Tomorrow wan gran' day,' said he, strutting about the fire. 'Me mother Sioux. When li'l' boy, she tel' me about the buf'loo kill, the winter meat. Whang, the tribe off, beeg hunt, plenty robe. Ol' chief say hunter

'fraid to sink de lance in de bull buf'loo, stay in tee-pee. Bring wood for ol' man, bring water for ol' squaw. One sleep, hunt de mustang. Woof! Whizz go de rope, whirr cry de rawhide, zip, zing say de bullet, mustang fall, crease! Beeg day! Heap shout, night!'

The sixth morning saw the beginning of the end. The half-breed started them, the second relay sent them to the third station, all relay riders hurrying into camp and changing horses to receive the mustangs as they came through the dunes to the west of the lakes. The north station had been abandoned. Bob Downs pointed them through the gateway, driving the wild horses like a flock of sheep. When the band emerged from the hills, every horseman closed in on them.

The final moment had come. The bewildered mustangs made several breaks, as a whole, leaders attempted to force the cordon, but on each repulse the horsemen drew closer and closer, ropes were shaken out, and the band started for the corral.

'Now, now!' shouted Pierre. 'Now for de gran' rush! Flank 'em close, whip up de rear, shoot heem for de corral wing! Quick, point heem straight! Whizz de rope, boy! Hol' heem hard, hol' 'em close, mek' sure! Ba gosh, she's runnin' fin'! Hol' 'em, boys, just one li'l' moment. Sit de saddle deep, shout de whoop! Now, all, all! By gar, she's ours!'

The mustangs were safely inside the corral. There was little resistance left. The band had fought a game but losing fight.

Actual work now began. Half a dozen leaders were roped, thrown, ironed, and pocketed to stout stakes, the remainder only foot-roped, also thrown, and a horseshoe lashed over a pastern joint. The work required several hours, the band numbering seventy-one head, of which four were mules, nine were branded horses, while three were of domestic origin. Among the latter was a chestnut gelding, a beauty, who nickered for corn on being led into camp. The thrall of the open had called him, had held him captive, but he had not forgotten the ration of other days and the kindness of some former master.

'That horse alone,' said Hamlet around the campfire that night, 'was worth all our trouble. Pierre, what are you going to call the chestnut?'

'Heem for M'sieu Joel's saddle,' answered the breed, grinning. 'Call heem — Call heem — What tink?'

'Pierre,' said Hamlet, nodding to the half-blood.

The breed stuttered, unable to find a word, but extended his hand. 'M'sieu Joel wan fin' boy. Chestnut, wan fin' hossy. Frien's, so. Good luck go with name. Pierre! Pierre! Pierre!'

CHAPTER XX

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

THE improvements on the Albion Ranch, recently purchased, reflected a previous epoch. The house had been built for family use, and only a few years before had dispensed a hospitality in keeping with its domain and holdings. But an evil day befell its owner, and now the signs of decay were noticeable in the general equipment of the ranch. The one exception to the common wreck was the corrals, the necessity of constant use having kept them in repair. They were modern in every respect — ample branding chute, sorting gate, and with a capacity of holding fully a thousand cattle.

On Joel's return, the cattle were being shaped up for delivery. Round-ups among the neighbors had been granted, and, where there was any chance of the ranch holdings having wandered beyond the home range, the outlying country was scouted. A wide circle of territory had been covered, and the brand was supposed to be well within the home range. Forrest had made a willing hand in the work, and on Joel's appearance the home outfit were riding lines, holding the cattle convenient for delivery.

The bank would be represented in the final transfer by an expert. 'From what I gather,' said Forrest, 'we'll have to side-step some when the big auger

gets here. Naturally, he'll show us where to head in and how it was done when he was a boy. But we'll have the ranch outfit and extra men with us. The boys all know that when their time ceases on the bank pay-roll it begins on mine. The only one liable to surge on the rope will be the expert.'

The latter arrived a day in advance of the date set for delivery to begin. He was extremely restless, consulting his watch continually, and, on the slightest contact with others, an air of authority fairly radiated from him.

On arriving, he bowed to the new owner, gave Forrest a passing glance, and inquired for the ranch foreman.

'Let him run on the rope,' said the man from Lovell's ranch, as the expert and the old foreman conferred apart, 'and I'll throw him so hard that he'll see stars at dinner-time. It's a shame, but this cow business does develop some powerful wise men. Before this one leaves, we'll have his measure within an inch.'

'I've ordered the first round-up for this afternoon,' said he to Joel, a few minutes later. 'I'm in a hurry. My services are in constant demand, passing on cattle paper where the banks are in any way interested.'

'This is my foreman,' said the boy, nodding to Forrest. 'Any arrangements you may make with him will suit me.'

'We're all ready,' said the new foreman, taking the initiative. 'We might fill the corrals to-night and begin tallying in the morning.'

'I have no time to tally these cattle,' announced the expert, with marked finality. 'The ranch is sold range count, and we'll count on the range. I haven't an hour to waste. I must go to Montana in June to check over a sale involving three times the value of this ranch and cattle.'

'Well, now,' languidly remarked Forrest, 'if you're so hurried, you'd better deputize the ranch foreman in your stead and start back at once. It's my intention to tally these cattle through a branding chute.'

'Use a branding chute in range count?' openly laughed the expert. 'Can't you count cattle in the open?'

'I'm not an expert,' said the old trail foreman politely. 'I might count a trail herd, or beeves on their way to shipping pens, with you, but a ranch, requiring a week's time, is a cow of a different color. Of course, there's tricks in all trades but ours, and I'm sure that a man of your ability wouldn't try and count a cow twice on a poor boy. This is an open range, and to count without a tally-mark is out of the question. If you can't wait, I'll bring your horse, but if you can spare the time, we'll tally as we count.'

'You may omit intimations,' loftily replied the bank representative. 'I'm employed by the year. My only object in range count is to get the work over and get away.'

'Then let me saddle your horse,' insisted the new foreman. 'We're going to take all the time we want to tally these cattle. Under my programme the

steers coming twos or over we'll cut the brush from their tails; any she stuff, due for the spaying knife, will carry the same mark, and the remainder will be tallied with a branding iron. Now, if you can only stay, you'll see our end of the work done in apple-pie order. Of course, the ranch outfit is subject to your orders, and if you can count a single hoof twice, on this boy, or myself, why, hop to it. A man of your front, an expert, that way, might count the same cattle twice on a tenderfoot, but being just simple folks, we'll tally them. If you counted a cow on me twice, and the bank found it out, they might fire you. Yes, they would. And you'd be a hard man to replace. Colonel, it won't do.'

The expert winced under Forrest's grilling. 'I wasn't sent here to take orders from a common cow-hand,' he retorted. 'There is no occasion to waste a week when a count can be made in three days.'

'Joel, bring his horse,' commanded the new foreman. 'Our guest won't even stay for dinner. Awful sorry, but we'll worry along without you. The contract will stand; there's an earnest payment on it, you know.'

'The buyers of this ranch were reported to be up-to-date cowmen,' sneeringly remarked the specialist. 'Can't even count cattle on the prairie.'

'No, dear,' cooingly replied Forrest. 'We're not even near experts. Still, no one with your gray matter can flim-flam us on a simple cow trade. Please don't consult your watch so often; it makes me nervous.'

'Must I rot here a week in order to do a few days' work?' disgustedly said the bank man on cattle credits.

'You needn't,' urged the new foreman. 'We'll excuse you, and the work will go on. But you had better stay. In fact, I know you will; that's why you were sent here. You're carrying too much sail for a cow country. Lay off your front, roll up your sleeves, and show this outfit that you really are a cowman. By the end of the week, we'll know whether you are true-blue or a four-flusher.'

The expert made anything but a graceful surrender. Counting the same cattle over was an old trick in range delivery, made possible by the constant influx of new capital and new men. Receiving a ranch was a new lesson to Joel, and only the caution of Forrest, in insisting on a tally-mark, prevented any chance for dishonesty.

The work of receiving began on the day set. The corrals were filled the night before, culled to the straight ranch brand, and the branding chute called into service. The latter would chamber ten cattle, held so compactly that it was but a moment's work to clip the brush from a tail or check the select ones and young stuff with a branding iron. As they left the chute they were counted, and with an indelible tally-mark on hide or appendage, a second tender of the same cattle would be self-evident. By saving the brushes, separate from sex, the cattle were classed and counted, and future work made easy.

The burden of holding the cattle separate fell to the seller. Lines were maintained between those delivered and from others to tender, the work following watercourses from the upper limits to the lower end of the range. The outfit was divided into two shifts, holding the lines, filling the corrals, and drifting those delivered to their former range. It took a week of dusty, hard work, and an extra hour to cast up accounts.

The brand tallied out a few short of fifteen thousand cattle, and the ranch passed into the possession of Wells Brothers. The transfer was devoid of any formality, a memorandum of acknowledgment, in duplicate, of the numbers received was exchanged, when the credit man, without comment, prepared to take his leave.

For some reason of his own, the expert had carefully withheld his name.

'Were you ever in the employ of a trust company?' inquired Joel, at parting.

'In the employ of banks and trust companies for years, passing on cattle paper.'

'You use only your initials on this memorandum. Isn't your name Stallsmith?'

'Yes, sir,' came the admission, somewhat blankly.

'The man who approved the loan on this ranch?'

'I recommended the paper as gilt edge.'

'Surely no harm to ask your name. This delivery then, gives you a good chance to check up your acquaintance with the Albion Ranch. Strange how

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chickens come home to roost, even in a cow country. I hope you'll excuse any rudeness on the part of my foreman and call again.'

The grass was well advanced, and without the loss of a day the outfit took the field to gather the steers for shipment. The latter had numbered up to expectations, with an addition of knotty fours, bringing the herd up to over thirty-three hundred. It was easy work with every hoof on the home range, and the end of the third day saw the steer stuff, above yearlings, made up and started.

'Give yourself a week to reach the railroad,' said the boy to his foreman. 'On the headwaters of the Republican, given another ten days, and the grass will be coming with a rush. With only two days aboard the cars, we want to lay these cattle down on their summer range on a set date. That will give them six months to acclimate in, and with that advantage, they'll weather any winter. For range run aren't they an even lot of steers?'

'Fine as silk,' agreed Forrest; 'split silk at that.'

'I'll order the cars,' said Joel, swinging into the saddle, 'and meet you a day out from the shipping pens. Until these two herds are out, I'm going to be as busy as a farmer getting ready to thrash. I'll have to get in touch with the outfit on the Arickaree, and when they sing out all ready, we want to hand them this herd. The Stoddard shipment will follow a week afterward. Now, treat your cattle well and I'll look for you in a week.'

'Don't forget to throw out those hints,' called the foreman, as the boy reined away.

'About any remnant not delivered? Trust that to me, the very first chance.'

Spring opened fully two weeks earlier in the Texas Panhandle than on the Arickaree. By timing the shipments from the lower ranges to meet the season above, the cattle would suffer no disadvantage in the change of climate. Acclimation must be met, noticeable even in cavalry horses, and the brothers knew the magic wrought by Northern winters on a Texas steer. Hence a full summer on the cattle range was an advantage of real value.

On reaching the station, within a few hours every detail was arranged with railway headquarters to handle the herd. Sargent was hailed and answered within a day, when the young cowman dropped down to the Stoddard Ranch for a single night.

'We're loading out on the morning of the 18th,' announced young Wells to the old ranchman, 'and all arrangements are made for your cattle to follow on the 25th. The live-stock agent will be on hand, and all he wants to know is, how many cattle you are going to tender for shipment. You can't faze me by offering too many, but the agent ought to know well in advance. It's going to take four heavy trains to handle the Albion cattle, and, if you need five, give notice the morning you finish gathering. To make time, twenty-eight cars to the train is the limit.'

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'The 25th?' mused the old cowman. 'That's good. We'll begin gathering about the 15th. That will give the railroad five or six days' warning. You dropped the flag on long yearlings, but you left the bars down on knotty threes and fours, and Manly has orders to clean the ranch of all ageing steer stuff. It's too late to beg for quarter now.'

The latter remark was music to Joel's ear. 'The bars may stay down till further orders,' said he to Manly. 'If any one can faze me on Lazy H cattle, at present stock and beef prices, the game's open. Maturing beeves is where we shine. That's my own, favorite department. If you have the cattle, by all means make it five trains.'

With a few idle days on his hands, the boy made a hurried trip to Fort Worth. There were details to arrange with the bank after the delivery, and the vacant time was utilized to advantage. The business affairs passed pleasantly, and, on taking leave, the cashier inquired if the delivery had come up to expectations.

'The brand fell short in numbers,' remarked Joel, 'which was to be expected, on short notice. The chances are that there is quite a remnant of cattle that were not tendered at delivery. It would hardly pay you to employ an outfit to gather any stragglers, but I'll make you an offer on the remainder. Our outfit can gather them at idle times. We'll allow you five dollars a head on everything not tally-marked, or an even thousand dollars for the brand outright.



THE LAZY H

Talk it over with your Mr. Stallsmith, and let us know.'

'You mean to say that the entire brand was not tendered at the recent delivery?' questioned the bank official.

'It's' just possible. The Pease River country has recently undergone a drouth, and on that account the ranch may have cattle some distance adrift. Mr. Stallsmith will explain all this to you, the why and wherefore.'

On meeting Forrest, a few days later, Joel reported that he had thrown out hints of possible cattle not tendered for delivery. 'As you suggested, I only sowed the seed. Simply threw out a feeler. When interest awakens, I want to spring the attempt of the expert to count cattle on us twice. Will they bite?'

'Use silver for bait, and they'll take under pole and all. I want another chance at Mr. Stallsmith's cow-sense; I want to powder-burn him as long as my caps hold out.'

'I hope to be standing near when you do. Quince, receiving that ranch showed me that I'm still in the spelling class. But I'll learn cows yet.'

The lesson was worth while. In a way elated over a new feature of his occupation, the boy had relaxed his usual caution, relying on his foreman, and was saved from a possible loss by the tie of friendship. Bread cast upon the waters had returned at a timely moment.

The herd was halted several miles out from the station. The cattle were classed for shipment, the twos into one grade, and the threes or over into another, a few cars of the weakest ones were reserved for the last train. The younger grade was sent to the pens first in trainloads, the yarding capacity lacking for the entire herd.

The railroad furnished a loading crew and the alacrity with which cattle were moved revealed a perfect system. The trains left an hour apart, each one in charge of a man from the new outfit, all of whom were promised a summer's work on the upper ranges. The last train fell to Joel, who made a willing hand, holding the cattle on their feet like a practical shipper.

'I'll be back in time to come through with the Stoddard herd,' said the boy to the live-stock agent. 'We may be able to load out a day in advance of the present programme. The ranch outfit above must receive the next shipment, and we must give the boys time to move this one to the summer range and return. I'll have a word with the foreman and he won't ask for an extra hour.'

On receiving the Albion Ranch, fully two thousand cows and heifers were marked for the spaying knife. It was important to begin the work at once, and a small outfit would be retained until the task was completed.

'You may not see me again in six months,' said Joel to his foreman, 'but rock along with your ear

to the ground. I want you to shape up that ranch just like the Lovell holdings. Let the boys go visiting by the week and feel around for cattle in the ranch brand.'

'That's a meaty idea. Those orders just suit me. Mostly visiting. How far shall I let the knife slip on that she stuff?'

'Let it fall on every hoof marked, and then some. Don't leave a drone in that brand of cattle. I'll need them next spring; they'll mature into beef.'

'Get the stock cattle back on a thrifty basis is the idea. No difference of opinion on that point. I'll prune up that ranch like a peach tree. Your train's whistling.'

CHAPTER XXI

THE IRON TRAIL

THE trains made the trip in forty hours. A temporary chute had been built, between stations, at the unloading point. Sargent was in waiting, the cattle were freed from the cars to the prairie, and the outfit moved them to the nearest water and placed them under herd. Joel's train reached the chute three hours after the first, which afforded opportunity for a brief conference between the young cowman and the Arickaree foreman.

'How soon can you receive the next herd?' questioned Joel.

'Five or six days,' answered Sargent; 'four in a pinch.'

'The grass? How's the grass?'

'The farther down the Big Sandy, the better advanced. From River Bend across to the Arickaree, it's as green as a garden.'

'Substance enough to move the cattle on?'

'Ample. Our horses crossed in good condition, coming at a pace of forty miles a day.'

The boy made a mental calculation. 'The Stoddard cattle are due to ship on the 25th. Could we load them out two days in advance of that date?'

'You mean my outfit to receive them?'

Joel nodded.

'Easily,' continued the foreman. 'I can send a

detail back, or a courier ahead to the ranch which is to summer this herd, and deliver a day out from the range. Bring on your cattle. We'll make ten miles with this herd yet to-day. 'The Lazy H steers next?'

Time was valuable. Men and horses were not considered. 'Here, at this unloading chute, on the 25th.'

'My wagon will be camped here that morning. Come on.'

Joel continued on with the empty train. At the first telegraph station he alighted and was soon in touch with the railroad office. The date of the next shipment was advanced two days, the live-stock agent located, and the Stoddard Ranch advised by wire and special messenger. The youth took a night train south, was delayed by finding every side-track filled with cattle trains, threading their way to the upper ranges. Instead of overland, as in other days, the herds were moving by rail.

With little loss of time Joel reported at the Stoddard Ranch. The gathering had ended, and, except to pass on the herd, nothing remained but the trip to the station and the loading out.

'I don't care even to count them,' announced the boy. 'I know Lazy H cattle better than the man who bred them. This herd suits me right down to the split in their hoofs. We'll have to class them to ship, and then we can count them by carloads. Are you sure you didn't overlook any scrubby threes and fours in gathering?'

'The boys say they didn't,' replied the old cowman, 'and from the looks of the herd, I agree with them. Good chance to clean up the ranch.'

'Really, I'm sorry there are not more knotty ones. Two winters in the North surely finishes a scrubby three or four into a little pony beef. He has the age and rounds out like a butter ball.'

It was the difference in view. The breeding ranch looked upon the knotty steers as cull stuff, while the upper beef ranges hailed them because of a maturity of years which insured a ripened beef. They were searched for in the markets. Pony beeves were in a class by themselves.

The herd left the ranch in ample time to ship out on the advanced date. Joel and his host remained at the ranch, only overtaking the cattle the second evening. Manly was hailed in passing, joining the ambulance as it circled the herd.

'The first thing in the morning,' said Joel to the foreman, 'is to cut your aged stuff separate from the twos. Hold everything off the water. Four men, with some shipping experience, will be needed for the first trains, and I'll take the last one. Better take a train yourself. Want to handle the Beaver outfit again this summer?'

'Not if I'm allowed to run loose without a guardian,' answered the Panhandle foreman. 'I'm a little bit scared of that upper country.'

'Drive on,' ordered Mr. Stoddard. 'Any of the boys will jump at the chance as shippers. Joe was raised on sweet milk.'

When classified and cut into car lots, the herd counted out over thirty-six hundred. Five heavy trains were required to handle the shipment, which was a repetition of the first one.

As before, Joel took the rear train. 'Draw up a contract,' said he to the old ranchman, 'and make the same commission firm the factor in this deal. All I ask is the chance to mature these Lazy H steers into beef, and you can name all other conditions.'

'I'll do nothing of the kind,' replied the old man. 'I may send a memorandum in to the commission house, but this sale goes as an open account. There's no need of even the scratch of a pen between us. Our interests are mutual. I'm just as glad to get these cattle off my range as you are to mature them. Your credit with me has been tested.'

'I was in hopes you would let us have Manly again ——'

'Joe's as worthless as an old dog,' interrupted Mr. Stoddard. 'All he's fit for is to lay around in the shade. He isn't worth a turn of shucks to any one but me. You'll have to worry along without him.'

Sargent was on hand to meet the trains, having traveled all night to keep his appointment. The trip down to the summer range was made at a leisurely pace, the owner accompanying the herd and making a hand. The outfit went on to the Arickaree after delivery, but the young cowman and

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his foreman spent several days on each of the ranges where the through cattle were being located for the summer. Both herds had come from safely above the quarantine line in Texas, and all danger of fever, by travel, was overcome by using the iron trail.

The new cattle located quickly. A few days after the return of the outfit, owner and foreman reached the Arickaree. The round-up had been set two weeks earlier than the spring before, and the men detailed on that task were still away. Joel remained at the upper ranch until the annual round-up reached the Arickaree on its way to the Platte River. The men reported a light drift, not an animal found adrift as far south as the headwaters of the Smoky. The Beaver outfit had been hailed on the latter watercourse, and reported no cattle in hand, having been out with a wagon and seven men over two weeks.

'That's good news,' said the young cowman. 'That means that we'll ship beef two weeks earlier than last fall.'

'About the first of August,' agreed Sargent. 'With a light run of beef to market, the Arickaree needn't hurry. How many beeves will this ranch ship?'

'Just enough to make room for the Albion cattle, seven or eight trains. But trim the ranch closely of all rough stuff and dead wood. You ought to see the Lovell ranches in the lower country. The cows are as even as screened wheat. Every hoof stands in a class by itself, thrifty as weeds. We must put this ranch and the Beaver on the same basis.'

On reaching the latter ranch, Joel found the winter outfit resting on its oars. With the exception of completing the exchange of ranch patriarchs with the Arickaree and the annual round-up, nothing had occurred to change the even run of events. The winter drift had proved largely imaginary, and with the splendid outlook for early beef, the outfit relaxed to the point of restlessness.

'If it wasn't for my social duties,' admitted Quinlin, 'time would surely hang heavy on my hands. This settlement down the Beaver is one of my best assets. But what's the use? Here I go and make a date to bring Dell down the next Sunday, and he sneaks away to Hackberry Grove, trying to locate a coyote den. And there you are. With all my days of trouble and nights of waking, that red-headed wretch just simply won't 'spond.'

The mustang hunt was not even mentioned. The ranch remuda, the next morning, however, passed under Joel's inspection.

'Where did that native horse, that chestnut, come from?' he inquired.

'After you left us,' regretfully admitted Hamlet, 'the outfit got restless, grouchy, would hardly speak to one another. The horses grew nervous, pawed holes in the ground, and something had to be done to ease the situation. I sent over on the Republican and had that mustang hunter, the one you mentioned so often, come down and give the boys a little outing, just to lift the strain. The result was,

we took in over seventy mustangs. Too near the Beaver, you understand, for the safety of good cow horses. You'll find four mules among the work stock, and a few old soldiers, once cow-ponies, here in the remuda. Throw your saddle on that chestnut and try out his road gaits.'

'You found him among the mustangs?'

'All the boys insisted that the horse must fall to you. In fact, the half-breed urged that the chestnut should be named after him. We called him Pierre from that moment.'

'Have you ever saddled him?'

'You'll find him just what the doctor ordered for a rising young cowman. Away on business for the ranch, that way, it was surely nice in the boys to remember you with the pick of the band.'

'Omit the sugar, please, and throw a saddle on him.'

The horse answered for himself. 'Better not say too much,' suggested Hamlet to the others. 'If my little story stands up, we got off better than we deserve. He'll come back on that horse and admit that we're the best cow outfit he ever worked.'

The monotony of the idle season was only broken by a visit from the solicitor of the commission firm. 'You needn't touch on the Arickaree,' suggested Joel. 'The upper ranch will send out about two thousand beeves and an extra train or two of mixed stuff.'

'Good advice will bear repeating,' said the solicitor, on leaving: 'Ship early.'

'Rest easy on that score. It may go against the grain when beeves are laying on three pounds a day but we'll ship them.'

The first shipment went out on the 25th of July. It numbered twenty-four cars, many of the beeves having reached the Beaver when yearlings, others four-year-olds, and none less than double-wintered. The range could produce no finer beef, and, on reaching the market, buyers for the different packing houses were alert for the first run of beef from the Beaver. Joel accompanied the consignment, and, when the sale sheet was handed him, he mused a moment and turned to Major Hunt.

'This shipment nets us just half the sum needed,' said he. 'In buying that Panhandle ranch, I promised a liberal payment on the first of September. By advancing half of it now and the remainder next week, we will establish our credit in banking circles at Fort Worth. Your firm was among the references given, and I want that bank to know that our promise to pay is good.'

'That's the idea,' said the old factor approvingly.

'Advise the bank by letter that this sum has been placed to its credit with you,' continued the boy, referring to the sales statement, 'and insist on an immediate answer, regarding my offer on any remnant of the brand not delivered. Urge that the matter should be closed at once; that the ranch outfit is idle and anxious for a big cow-hunt.'

The old factor made a brief memorandum. 'This

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remnant of cattle were not tendered on taking over the ranch and are supposed to be astray?' he questioned.

'Exactly. I'll be in with the next shipment and will expect an answer, or some one from the bank can meet me here. You'll have advice of the shipment in advance, and can wire the bank. The idea is, to let them come to me.'

The second consignment from the Beaver reached the market on August 1st. The commission firm had been advised, and, on reaching the office, almost the first persons to greet the boy were the cashier and expert from Fort Worth.

'I can't talk to you now,' said Joel, in greeting, 'because our account with this firm is in red ink, but this afternoon it will be good. But come with me and I'll show you a thousand beeves from our Beaver range; one train of straight Stoddard cattle from the Panhandle. I want you to see the magic, on a Texas steer, of two winters in the North. Then you'll understand maturing beef.'

'It's an old story with me,' loftily replied the expert, consulting his watch as usual. 'We came in last night, and want to leave by the first train.'

'Then we will excuse you,' politely nodded Joel. Turning to the cashier, he continued: 'We may want to establish a credit with you some day or use you as a reference, and, while passing away the time, let's take a stroll through the yards. These two trains are a sample of six thousand beeves, this year's

harvest from one ranch. You know Mr. Stoddard, and I'll show you his ranch brand on to-day's market. This afternoon you can see the sale sheets on the Lazy H train of beeves. Then you'll know why Uncle Dudley recommended us to you as a buyer for the Albion Ranch. Come on, and let's take a little stroll through the yards.'

The enthusiasm of youth, coupled with the commercial instincts of the banker, carried the moment. The boy led the way, the cattle expert reluctantly joining, and the trio spent an hour overlooking the offerings on the day's market. Joel adroitly led his guests to his own beeves, listened to the haggling between salesmen and buyers, the guessing on weights, and the usual gamut of market clatter.

The bank official was in capable hands and readily absorbed the main details. 'Give me the figures,' said he, to the boy, 'from cost to their selling value on to-day's market.'

'At twos,' replied Joel, 'they cost fourteen dollars, laid down on the Beaver. To-day they class as beeves on foot, crossing the scale and selling gross weight. To get their net value, we'll have to wait for the sales statement. The expense of holding them two years will amount to a dollar a head. The Beaver is still an open range, free grass and ample water.'

The youth had lodged his point. As the trio sauntered away from the yards, a most cordial feeling had developed. An afternoon hour was ap-

pointed, when they met again in the private office of Major Hunt.

Without a word Joel handed the sale sheets to the cashier.

‘That Lazy H train of beef netted fifty-six dollars a head,’ mused the banker in mild amazement, handing the statement to his expert. ‘Small wonder that Wells Brothers are buying bankrupt ranches in the Texas Panhandle. That beats banking.’

‘Not many banks in your State,’ said Major Hunt, ‘that can show annual earnings equal to the yearly profits of our mutual clients. As cowmen, the boys are just beginning to preen their wings. A few years more and they will size up as cattle kings.’

The conversation finally led to the matter at issue.

‘My only reason for making you an offer on the remnant is,’ said Joel, ‘on account of our foreman on the Albion Ranch. He’s getting along in years, and I want to make him a present of any stray cattle that he may gather. By giving him an interest in the brand, it holds his services and ensures success in our last ranch venture. My offer still stands on the remnant astray.’

‘Why, you are liable to gather a thousand cattle in that brand yet,’ insisted Mr. Stallsmith, the expert. ‘You haven’t made any offer that I would sanction.’

‘Then keep the brand and gather it yourself,’ smilingly said the youth. ‘If we were inclined to be tricky, without any principle — cow-thieves, in a

way — we could gather the missing cattle, run the tally-mark on them, and you would never be any the wiser. It may seem odd to you that we don't, but that's the way my folks raised me. Better gather them yourself and tender them on delivery.'

Joel extended his hand to the banker. 'I believe that concludes our business to-day. The balance of the September payment is to your credit with this firm. If you hear of any other ranches for sale in the Panhandle, let us know. We may have some idle funds after the beef harvest's over.'

'One moment,' protested the cashier, holding the boy's hand. 'Let me sell you that remnant first.'

'Our experts differ. My lump offer on the brand may stand, but I'll withdraw my bid per head. I'm afraid your Mr. Stallsmith might count them on us twice, and they ain't worth it.'

The banker exchanged a look with his expert. Major Hunt noticed that the pivotal point was reached, and instantly came to the rescue.

'Meet this boy halfway,' said he to the cashier. 'He wants that remnant as a present to a faithful man. He admits that there are tricks in the trade, and refuses to stoop to them. Meet his offer, and shake hands with yourself when you sell a ranch to an honest boy. Haggling will win you nothing.'

'The tail may go with the hide,' nodded the banker. 'The brand is yours outright. I'll give you a bill of sale to that effect.'

The article was drawn. Joel scanned it, and

turned to Major Hunt. 'Include this in to-day's payment. There may be a few hundred cattle yet in this brand, not tally-marked, and I hope that our foreman will gather a nice little beginning of cows for himself. I'll let you know how many he gathers.'

The latter remark was addressed to the cashier. There was a mild but clear note of victory in Joel Wells's voice.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ACORN AND THE OAK

FORREST was advised of the purchase of the Albion remnant. To the alien mind it might look like a risk, while in reality absolute ownership of the brand was a necessity. To divide its possession was to invite trouble.

The march of the patient cattle across the ages proves their vitality. Their ability to weather summer drouth or winter storm was known, and when the elements drove them astray, those who knew them best put their faith in the sturdy cattle. In fact, it was the experience of every cowman that, given a chance, the cattle never disappoint.

Harvest was on. Joel returned to the Beaver, and for the month of August double trains were the order of the day. Many of them were routed direct to Chicago, the quality of the beeves justifying any market, and proving their finish on scale and in mart. The actual work fell to Dell, as the older brother was compelled to go to market, oversee shipments from the Arickaree, and both were tireless in the saddle or to any call of duty.

During the latter part of the month, the older boy touched on the Arickaree, to pass upon a shipment. It was the second one from the ranch, and was expected to classify as prime beef. Many of them were native to the range, with scarcely a trace of

Texas blood, a full train, the flower of the ranch, and a matter of mutual pride to foreman and owners. McWilliams even joined in gathering the consignment.

‘There’s the best train of beef that ever left the Arickaree,’ said the ex-foreman to Joel and Sargent. ‘I’ve looked after them since their birth, and as this is farewell, I want to feast my eyes on them. They have reached their prime, and my calves and I have come to the parting of the ways.’

‘Go to market with them,’ urged the owner.

‘I’m afraid of the trip. And you’ll be hurrying back for the next shipment.’

‘I’ll quarter you at a good hotel, and call for you at the end of the beef harvest. You are not on our pay-roll, but you’re worth any two men on the ranch, and for the next month I insist that you be my guest. Your calves will pay the reckoning. Boys, Mac’s going with this shipment.’

The crippled foreman protested, but the other carried his point.

‘It makes no difference whether you return to the Arickaree or the Beaver, your job’s secure. You’ll be old man Dan to the boys on the lower ranch the same as here. And any time you want to avoid a winter, I’ll get you a pass to the new ranch on the Pease River. The boys there tell me that they often have quail pot-pie for dinner, and that about Christmas time, they sometimes have wild turkey. Think it over.’

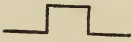
Another question, of a different nature, came up for adjustment.

'You're going to take both herds of through stuff to the Beaver, I hear?' protested Sargent. 'Why not let me have the Albion cattle?'

'Because the lower ranch will ship two beeves to your one this harvest. We can't hold the Beaver under six thousand head. The beeves are there; they have reached their maturity, and we must run them to market.'

'What will the Arickaree harvest two years hence? Our own breeding, a single train of beef!'

'That's your misfortune. The Beaver has the range, and it's more convenient to market. The ranch must be restocked, and we have no other cattle.'

'The Arickaree is going to ship three thousand. That makes room for the Hat brand,  the Albion stuff.'

'You may get them yet. Major Hunt is making a wide inquiry and he may locate some cattle for sale. I'm as anxious to restock the Arickaree as you are. But unless we can buy them, one or the other of our ranches must go half-stocked. Jack, if the cattle can be had, I'll give you the chance you want.'

'I want the Arickaree to be in the race,' earnestly protested the foreman. 'That's all. How can I make a showing with a half-stocked beef ranch?'

'If possible, this ranch will be restocked. We tested our credit for every hoof we could buy last

spring, and if I can't furnish you other cattle, you can have the Albion string. Still, I would like to mature it and the Lazy H herd on the Beaver — straight Pease River cattle.'

The marketing of a beef depended on his perfect maturity. When once natural growth had ceased in the physical animal, all the energies of prodigal nature were concentrated in the finishing tallow. Given the required age, three to four hundred pounds were taken on in as many months, and as an apple ripens, the animal reached its prime. When the perfect maturity, noticeable to the practical man, was in evidence, the beef was ripe for market. It was for this reason that the Arickaree and Beaver ranges must ship out every hoof that qualified as prime beef.

The Arickaree shipment was routed by way of Kansas City. It gave the consignment the advantage of two markets, admitted of locating McWilliams near the cattle yards, while another incident of value was the discovery of a herd of through cattle. Colorado had quarantined against Texas cattle; a single herd had crossed the line, and almost reached Trail City before being detected. The State authorities caused the arrest of the foreman, the herd was isolated, and the matter was under arbitration. The cattle were contracted for delivery in Montana, but, being unable to satisfy the quarantine officials, they were held under the strictest detention. The State was master of the situation,

the surrounding country was vacated by local cattle, and the through herd enjoyed every advantage of range, except that it was unmovable.

Major Hunt saw an opportunity. 'Buy that herd,' said he to Joel. 'When quarantine lifts, there won't be time to trail it anywhere. The cattle have been under detention two months now, delivery day in Montana has already passed, and you are in a position to handle the herd. It runs full thirty-five hundred, and you can trail it to one of your ranges in a week. Ten days after the first frost falls, you can turn the herd loose on its winter range.'

The Arickaree train of beef was sent east, and the boy started for Trail City. The quarantined cattle were found on the same creek, same range, as that occupied by the Tin Cup herd the summer before. The boy spent a day at the camp and returned to the city.

'Well, I've seen the cattle,' he reported to Major Hunt. 'Pull the strings. I'll buy them.'

'Their quality?' said the old factor, with noticeable hesitancy. 'Are you satisfied with the quality of the cattle? The herd comes from Palo Pinto County.'

'Little pony, black-jack steers,' answered the boy. 'Come from the cross-timbers of Palo Pinto. Give me that herd two years, and some fine morning I'll top this market with a train or two of pony beeves. The herd was contracted as twos, but one fourth of them will run threes and fours. They have the age

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to fatten to the last ounce. You needn't let on that I'm wild about them, but I want those little blocky steers.'

The sale of the herd was in the hands of a commission firm, connected with the Kansas City yards. Major Hunt and his client thrashed over the details, ending by the old factor leaving the office with instructions to close a trade on the herd.

'Name October 1st, quarantine lifted or in force, as the day of delivery,' admonished the boy. 'We'll have an outfit free by that time, and I'm willing to hold them a week or two. And if Colorado refuses to let us have the herd after the first frost, we'll turn the cattle loose in the Arkansaw Valley and gather them the next spring during the round-up. I want that herd.'

The old factor returned within an hour. 'There are only two items in solution,' said he; 'secrecy of sale and place of payment. Damage suits are liable to arise for failure to deliver on the contract and liability on account of fever.'

'Not a case of fever in Colorado this summer,' vouched Joel.

'There's ample time yet; and if a cow dies of old age, that herd will be held liable. If the sale can be kept a secret until the cattle are delivered to you, with Fort Worth as the settlement point, I can close the deal in a minute.'

'Close it. I'll take any chance to get that herd. Have you agreed on the price?'

'The herd changes owners at fifteen dollars straight. There wasn't the difference of a word on that point.'

The sale was completed. The boy left for home, and within a few days was in consultation with Sargent. The latter, only, was taken into the former's confidence, and the two planned like pirates to get possession of the quarantined herd.

'I'll hold back the last shipment,' said the foreman, 'until after the first frost in the Arkansaw Valley. We'll drop down to Kit Carson and load out from there. After the shipments are off our hands, we'll lay around a few days awaiting the word. And if you order the outfit to report, along in the evening of October 1st, I'll know the reason why. Oh, we must get those pony steers!'

The harvest was nearing its end. Every ten days Dell came down from the Beaver with a thousand head, shipped them out, and returned for the next consignment. Near the end of September, both ranches had their last shipment in hand, with fine weather and not a harbinger of frost in sight. October was ushered in. On the first day of the month, not a stranger was seen on the deserted streets of Trail City. At the first station east, however, Joel Wells and the ex-foreman alighted from an early train, made inquiry for a ranch to the southwest, secured horses, and rode away. Early in the evening they arrived at the camp of the quarantined herd, to find the cattle bunched and ready. A short

hour's work followed, and the cattle were counted.

'Bed them down,' said the boy to the foreman in charge, 'and night-herd them until relieved. Better keep your wagon mules and remuda in hand. It's going to be fine moonlight to-night, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if a cow outfit looks you up between now and morning. In case one does, I want your outfit to start home within an hour; I want it to be twenty miles from here when the sun rises. Now, if you don't know why, don't ask any questions. You and I will send a wire in the morning, giving the count on the herd, and then you'd better overtake your outfit.'

'You needn't kick me on the shins to make me wise,' said the foreman blandly. 'Not long ago I had a dream that I would be relieved late to-night or early in the morning. From the looks of the stars, I wouldn't be a little bit surprised if my dream came true.'

A State deputy was supposed to keep an eye over the isolated herd. He was stationed at Trail City, visited the camp almost daily, satisfied himself, and returned to town. He had even paid his respects to the herd on the morning of the 1st, finding it scattered, as usual, jollied the outfit, and went his way.

As darkness fell, Joel and the Texan rode out several miles, and, before ten o'clock returned, piloting in Sargent and his outfit. The latter had crossed the river well above the abandoned trail town, and was groping his way, trusting to the rattle

of his wagon and herd songs to attract the attention of those out on scout.

The guards changed on the sleeping herd, the trail outfit inspanned their team and stole away. The foreman, even, refused to remain.

'You don't need me to wire in the count on this herd. That was left open with me, and now that I think it all over, I have full confidence in you sending it in honestly. If a cow died to-day, from dry murrain, within fifty miles of here, they're liable to throw me in jail again, and I'm my mother's own dear boy and love my liberty. When the sun rises in the morning, I'll be in Kansas, traveling at the rate of seven miles an hour. Give my regards to that quarantine officer; quite a nice chap. Just because I forgot to say farewell this morning is no good reason that my folks didn't teach me manners. Remember me to him, and, if he insists on knowing where I am, risk an opinion that I'm about ninety-seven miles southeast of here, hitting the trail for Texas.'

Delivery of a herd between dark and dawn had occurred before. With possession of the cattle, Joel Wells could rest until quarantine was lifted. The herd was again freed on its own range, and word was left at camp for the deputy that the new owner was anxious to meet him. The boy left for town, the hired horses were returned, while Sargent busied himself riding the range.

As expected, the quarantine officer made his usual visit. No sooner had he reached the camp than

strange men were noticed, one of whom was McWilliams.

'Yes,' said the latter to the State veterinary, 'the herd was sold some little time back, but we never could get around to receive it until last evening. The cattle are in the possession of the Wells boys this morning, and Mr. Joel wants to see you. Strange you didn't meet him on the trail.'

'A boy about twenty, riding a fine chestnut horse?'

'That's the lad. The foreman will be in soon.'

'Where is the through outfit?'

'Oh, they left for home at once. It seems that the Colorado authorities gave them some trouble over their cattle. They supposed their herd to be immune and entered the State, relying on a certificate of inspection issued by the inspector of brands of Palo Pinto County, Texas. Old Palo Pinto is safely above the Texas quarantine line; above the cross-timbers has always been recognized as safe cattle. The outfit felt that they were persecuted unjustly and left the jurisdiction of the State between dark and sunrise. The foreman begged to be remembered to you.'

The deputy was baffled by the report and rode to the herd. He and Sargent returned near noon, and shortly afterward Joel put in an appearance.

'I made inquiry for you around town,' said the boy to the quarantine official, 'and learned that you had left to look after some cattle in your charge.'

Being strangers, we passed one another within easy hailing distance. The herd changed owners yesterday, and you are welcome to hold it in quarantine to your own satisfaction. If these cattle impart fever within ten days of this date, we're responsible ranchmen and will pay any damage. We have taken the matter up with the State officials this morning, and you may look for orders within a week, releasing the herd. Until then, you will find this outfit law-abiding to the letter.'

The deputy admitted that he was wholly under orders. 'I'm just as willing to get away as you are,' said he. 'It will require orders from my superiors, with or without frost. Any other matters involved are of no concern to me. You boys appear reasonable, and I'll try and meet you halfway.'

The outfit relaxed. With nothing but loose day-herding, time hung heavy.

'Which herd do you want for the Arickaree?' inquired Joel of his foreman, a few days later. 'The Lazy H brand rightfully belongs on the Beaver, but you can have your choice of the other two.'

'Thanks,' cautiously replied Sargent. 'Now what's up your sleeve? Have I been promoted to general manager?'

'Some time ago you were uneasy about your beef harvest for two years hence. So take your choice of the two herds, these Palo Pinto ponies or the Albion cattle.'

'Why, I'll take the Hat cattle, the Albion brand,

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Panhandle bred, with six months on this upper range. Now, let me see your axe.'

'The axe I have to grind is merely the payment of an old debt. I've acknowledged it before, and now I'm going to pay it. When we ship the Hat twos, two years hence, one hundred head will be yours, net on the market. We'll not even brand or tally-mark them now. You will own that many beeves in any shipment you choose in that brand. I owe you for kicking me into buying the Arickaree Ranch, and that's an easy way of paying you: let you wait for your money. Now, keep your thanks to yourself, and an eye over the ranch. It's your just due, old boy.'

The release came within a week, with frost and official consent, and the cattle were moved to the Beaver. In the mean time Dell had gathered the Lazy H herd on their summer range and was trailing it to the lower ranch. After delivering the last cattle acquired, Sargent gathered the Hat brand, moving it to the Arickaree, and outside work came to an end, both ranges fully restocked.

Within the two years covered by this chronicle the brothers had gone forward with a sure step. At the close of the summer's operations, they found themselves in possession of three fine ranches. The beef harvest, just ended, had brought returns that placed the holdings of the boys on a sound financial footing. With hope beating high, come fair or foul weather, unflinchingly they faced the future.

The one clear note in the lives of Wells Brothers is, that they arose superior to all environment. With others failing and falling around them, they laid their foundations and built their house. With much to contend against in their occupation, the boys took root, like young oaks, and carved for themselves a sure place among their fellow cowmen.

THE END

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